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Karl Marx

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CONDITIONS OF ILLUSION:

Papers from the Women's Movement

Edited by Sandra Allen, Lee Sanders and Jan Wallis

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The articles in this book have all been written since the publication in 1972 of *The Body Politic*, the first collection of writings from the women's movement. While we have tried to include articles on many of the important issues affecting women's lives, we make no claim that this book represents all the viewpoints held by the different groups that make up the women's movement and the debate going on within it. We hope that the Documents and Guide to groups give some idea of the breadth and variety of activities and struggles which have developed out of women's changing consciousness.

Feminist Books

We are a collective of four women, three of whom have worked for over two years on the compilation of this book. This is our second publication, the first being *Wedlocked Women* by Lee Comer (September 1974). We act not only as a publishing house but also as a distribution centre for feminist literature.

About this book

Women working in and with the Feminist Books Collective did the editing, typesetting, lay-out and design of *Conditions of Illusion* and are distributing it. We regret that the high price of paper has made this book more expensive than we would have liked. Any profits will go directly to the financing of further publications from the women's movement.

Sandra Allen, Lee Sanders and Jan Wallis
Leeds, December 1974

CONTENTS

BODY POLITICS

Crisis in Chidbirth

Christine Beels 8

Why I laughed when Anna was born

Jan Wallis 19

Punitive Attitudes to Contraception and Abortion

Katy Jennison & Hilda Bartle 27

Abortion Accounts

Monica Sjoo et al 35

Medical Mystifications

Lee Comer 45

Vaginal Politics

Angela Briggs 51

SEXUALITY & IDEOLOGY

Notes on Ideology

Alison Fell 60

Cultural Influences on Female Sexuality

Ann Oakley 73

The Suppressed Power of Female Sexuality

Angela Hamblin 86

Sexuality & Submission

Beatrix Campbell 99

Gayness & Liberalism

Elizabeth Wilson 110

THE PATTERN OF TINY CONTRADICTIONS

Learning Sexism & Femininity

Maria Loftus 128

Sex Roles in Children's Literature <i>Cammilla Nightingale</i>	141
The Ideology of Sex Differences <i>Ann Oakley</i>	154
Patter of Tiny Contradictions <i>Valerie Charlton</i>	166

SEXISM, CAPITALISM & THE FAMILY

The family under capitalism

The Conditions of Illusion <i>Michelene Wandor</i>	186
---	-----

Functions of the Family

<i>Lee Comer</i>	208
------------------------	-----

The Family, Social Work & the Welfare State

<i>Angela Weir</i>	217
--------------------------	-----

Sexism, Capitalism and the Family

<i>Rosalind Delmar</i>	229
------------------------------	-----

Trying to stay human

Women's work in the Industrial Revolution

<i>Jean Gardiner</i>	244
----------------------------	-----

Women's Work

<i>Sarah Boston</i>	259
---------------------------	-----

The Independence Demand

<i>Leonora Wilson et al</i>	269
-----------------------------------	-----

Trying to stay Human

<i>Audrey Wise</i>	278
--------------------------	-----

And the struggle goes on

Equal Pay

Sarah Boston 289

Some Facts about Equal Pay

Felicity Trodd 299

The Nightcleaners' Campaign

Sally Alexander 309

Working Women's Charter

Linda Smith 326

Striking Progress

M. Edney & D. Phillips 332

DOCUMENTS

Working Mothers' Charter

Mothers in Action 350

'Target' Maternity Leave Campaign

Mothers in Action 353

TUC's Best Practice Maternity Leave

Recommendations 355

Battered Women's Guide to the Law

Angela Phillips 358

Statement of Aims

N. E. Women's Liberation Groups 362

Aware 367

AIMS 373

WACC 375

Women & Psychiatry 381

GUIDE TO GROUPS

Jan Savage 384

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Body Politics

Crisis in Childbirth

The whole process of childbirth today has been taken away from the women who actually bear the children into the clinical world of male obstetricians, and it is getting progressively harder for a normal healthy woman to experience normal healthy childbirth (though potentially 97% of us could). The medical profession takes over and dominates our bodies and feelings for nine months plus; controlling and putting us down while we're in their hospitals; while at home, the magazines we may read eulogise the beauty and dignity of our impending motherhood. In the same magazines, we also read emotive articles extolling every woman's right to sensationless childbirth, with scarcely ever a reference to any accompanying dangers or discomforts.

Within our smaller personal world, once pregnant, there can also be another subtler kind of pressure - to give birth 'naturally', to be a success without drugs, to be the only one on the ward without stitches.

The midwife suggested that I have a shot of pethedine... I felt defeated and confused. I remembered C., my pregnancy teacher, saying that pethedine was bad and that she hadn't used it. I remembered other women saying how confused they felt with pethedine - I felt a failure, I shouldn't 'need' it.

I hope to outline here the major areas of pregnancy and birth that seem to cause us most anxiety. They cause anxiety to some doctors as well as to many women but the medical profession is so absolute and all powerful that radical change seems remote at present. But it helps if you at least know what you're up against and what alternatives there are.

In a typical pregnancy, a booking for home or hospital confinement must be made at about three months. Unfortunately, this has become much less of a choice in

recent years. In Holland, 50% of all births take place at home and they have the lowest infant mortality rate in the world. America, where there are no domiciliary confinements at all and a very high level of obstetric interference, comes fourteenth down the list! The BMA has a declared policy of working towards 100% hospital births (*Peel Report 1970*) though there is no evidence that the increased number of hospital births is responsible for the reduction in infant mortality. In fact, the Committee, which saw one as the logical outcome of the other and decided that from then on all women should be confined in hospitals, actually based their recommendations on a statistical fallacy. (*Effectiveness and Efficiency: Random Reflections on Health Services. Prof. A. L. Cochrane.*)

The Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services (AIMS), in a survey of over 2,000 women who had experienced both home and hospital delivery, found that 84% preferred their home confinement. As far as I can tell, the BMA has not done any consumer research on this subject. However, if you're under thirty, preferably under twenty five, healthy and with adequate home surroundings, there should be no valid reasons for being hospitalised if you don't want to be, though if your GP only believes in hospitals you may have difficulty. For instance, a friend of mine, really anxious to be at home for her second birth, was told by her GP that she couldn't, as she'd run a high temperature after her first delivery. When she was eight months pregnant and still anxious, though resigned, he told her casually that the temperature wouldn't have made the slightest difference, it was just that he 'didn't believe in home confinements'. By then, of course, it was too late for her to change her booking. Most women, though, do want the extra clinical security of hospital for a first birth at least; but only for the birth and not for too long afterwards. A woman (who later changed to a home confinement) relates this conversation with a male doctor on her first hospital visit.

He: How long do you want to stay for?

She: 48 hours at the most.

He: Well, I'll book you in for ten days.

She: But you just asked me and I said 48 hours.

He: Well, no, I think we'll make it ten days like we always do.

She: But.....

You may feel that you'll just discharge yourself anyway if you feel fine, but a hospital would be most reluctant to let you go as there would be no midwife booked to attend you at home unless you were officially due to come home after 48 hours or five days or whatever.

To continue with pregnancy.....at about four months you start regularly attending hospital or clinic for checks on blood pressure, urine, the baby's position etc. and this can be quite a humiliating and anxiety-making process. There is a mass appointment system, mass queuing, sometimes in twice-used gowns, no creche provisions (in fact, often signs warning you not to bring children) and, finally, no chance to ask your carefully saved up questions, as the doctor talks over your belly to his students for the two minutes you actually spend up on the couch. One woman said, 'For five months, all they ever said to me was 'spend a penny along here, trot down the passage there, pop your clothes in here, hop up on there, jump down from here and run along home now

Of course, our National Health Service has created for itself terrible space and staffing difficulties, but pregnant women are not the cattle they are so often likened to; in fact, they are particularly vulnerable and prone to fears and anxieties. In few hospital clinics would it be possible for a man to actually get through to the doctor either out of interest or because he had his own questions to ask, nor do I know of any hospital relaxation classes that men can join. The National Childbirth Trust does run classes that are either specifically for couples, or which include fathers for some sessions, but of course, they are outside the state system. I've also found domiciliary clinics, never hospitals, where children could climb up on the couch, listen through the foetal stethoscope etc. Creche facilities seem an urgent requirement if, in future, women

are going to be hospitalised for second or subsequent births.

However, almost all hospitals will now allow husbands to be present at the birth of their child. Husbands, yes, fathers not automatically and anyone else, like a woman friend you might particularly want, not likely. A husband must sign a consent form to say that he'll do as asked when the time comes and he will not be encouraged to stay if you are admitted to hospital while still in the early stage of labour. Instead, he'll get a 'go home to bed, there's nothing you can do, ring in nearer the time' type of brushoff. This is sad as, probably, the idea that you both had was that those long dragging hours were just the time when you could give each other comfort and support. Women do need company tremendously and should never ever be left alone in labour. It goes without saying that the person with them should be a companion of their choice! Dependence on the companion becomes very great and should not be denied by staff.

Sister asked John if he'd leave as another patient had to be admitted. John said he'd prefer to stay but Sister then said he looked white and must go. Without John, I just became a load of old rubbish and didn't manage my breathing at all, resorted to gas and air, and went quite dopey.

Your companion will have to leave if you need a Caesarian, which is fair enough as it is usually an emergency operation, but also if you need a forceps delivery. These are becoming so routine that it might be time to ask whether fathers shouldn't be permitted to stay, but more about forceps delivery later.

At nine months, or thereabouts, you reach the end of pregnancy and the baby is due. Unwarranted medical interference with the natural course of labour, or 'active management' as doctors prefer to call it, may start here and this is a very delicate area. It's extremely hard for women/parents to know whether something is medically urgent or necessary, or whether the doctor is merely following his own beliefs on intervention. In a truly clinical situation,

most of us would probably not think of contradicting or flatly disagreeing (well, we might think of it but we wouldn't do it!) but childbirth is not, or at least has not been until recently, a truly clinical situation, but a natural normal, everyday function for which most women's bodies are already pretty well equipped.

In recent years, there has been a dramatic and worrying increase in the trend towards 'nine to five obstetrics' or 'daylight deliveries'. This process involves starting labour artificially (or hastening weak contractions) by stimulating the uterus with drip fed Syntocinon. A drip set up (attached to the arm) at nine in the morning will almost invariably produce a baby by late afternoon. The drip remains in position for the whole time and regulates contractions throughout labour. The woman must remain in bed the whole time. Most hospitals emphatically maintain that artificial induction is used only if medically necessary, i.e. high blood pressure, baby very overdue; but I know of at least one hospital (in Essex) where even women who manage to arrive in spontaneous labour are immediately put on the drip to ensure the babies are born before the day staff go off duty. Also, a distinguished obstetrician is quoted as saying 'for years we've been harrassed by women saying - please I'm fed up with this pregnancy - and we've resisted. Now we don't, we induce up to 50% of women, mainly at their own request ...I think the concept of a system that controls labour is fair and will be perfected'.

The medical argument for induction is that two of the greatest hazards in labour are its timing and its length and both of these can be manipulated, with near total safety in an induced birth. But against this, a *British Medical Journal* article (October 1973) showed that babies of induced mothers suffered significantly more from jaundice than those of spontaneously delivered mothers (as did also the infants of women given epidurals). Surely there must be some point to the natural timing of labour - for most of us at least? To many women, I'm sure, controlled labour seems a good idea, but if there is no choice, merely a 'come in at 9 a.m. on Monday if you haven't started'

then it just seems another way of narrowing choice.

Many women feel a sense of loss and failure at not starting their own labours and, also, with Syntocinon, there tends to be no gradual build-up in the strength of contractions, so that they can be understood and come to terms with. Labour starts as it continues - at full speed and top strength. I think that a consent form of some kind is needed now, on which a woman indicates whether she is willing to have her labour induced for other than obvious reasons such as high blood pressure.

Women should be fully informed about all aspects of modern labour as a matter of course, fairly early on in pregnancy, and this should include the disadvantages, as well as the advantages of analgesia in labour. The media place great emphasis on every woman's right to an epidural drugs etc. but they seldom mention the drawbacks, nor do they seem to give an equal amount of publicity to psychoprophylactic techniques or other ways of 'natural' child bearing. (It's unlikely that your GP or clinic will have given you information on these available alternatives either.)

Regional anaesthesia, like an epidural (an injection into the base of the spine that makes the lower part of the body numb), is offered more and more frequently to women nowadays, though it is still far from routine, mainly because it requires the attendance of an anaesthetist throughout. It always sounds marvellous - the woman sits up in bed reading etc., feeling nothing at all, while her uterus is actually contracting in full labour. However, the infant can suffer from the effects of this inhibited labour, as the mother has a greatly restricted pushing urge; this means that the baby will almost certainly have to be delivered by forceps, the woman will need an episiotomy, and the baby will probably be cot nursed for up to 48 hours, while it recovers from its birth shock. (Cot nursing means that it will not be fed, handled, sometimes even not seen by its parents.)

The administering of drugs like Pethedine or Pethilorfan,

and inhalation analgesia (gas and oxygen), is seen by most medical staff as routine and a part of even the most normal labour and drugs are sometimes literally forced on women who do not want or need them. (Pethedine is not actually a completely convincing pain killer, a research project showed that 50% - 60% of mothers found their pain relieved, but 30% given a placebo found their pain relieved too!) Drug refusal, no matter how tactfully done, seems to provoke an unpleasant reaction from the attendants - they seem to take a rejection of their goodies as a personal insult! Of course, they also think you're going to be more troublesome and noisy.

A nurse told her she was stupid not to have taken Pethedine - that was not particularly helpful, nor was it helpful when Sister wandered into our room and told her not to make such a noise and deliberately left the door open wide so that everyone could hear

Probably the majority of women do want some relief in labour; all of us have our levels of pain tolerance and thank God the days of Victorian melodrama are gone - women screaming for days on end, clinging on to knotted sheets, but even so, there must be an informed choice and then the woman must have the positive right to accept or refuse. (An aspect I haven't room to cover here is why, sadly, most women are afraid of their bodies and its sensations and are most willing to be very heavily drugged and passively managed during birth; our cultural attitudes towards childbirth differ sharply in practise from the romanised life-giving female stereotype - perhaps, though, the old male custom of 'churching' women after they've given birth has technically died out, many of the ideas of shame, guilt and deserved pain remain.)

Drugs administered against the will of the patient would seem to be a gross violation of liberty, but the woman, once trapped on the delivery table, is not the best able to protest!

...next thing was Night Sister saying I had to have sleep and giving me an injection straight off before I even opened my mouth. I felt most disappointed as I in no way

needed it. I really only wanted company and to know how I was doing....About 6 a.m. Night Sister came back and was most aggravated by me, as she said I had not been resting but fighting the drugs (quite right, I had!) She had another injection which I asked not to be given and said I wanted to sit up. I was told to lie down and rest - she was extremely angry with me and said to stop this breathing and rest. She gave me the injection saying have what you can on the NHS. I am afraid I was rather upset and just wanted her to go away and leave me alone. I felt totally helpless and frustrated.....

Research shows now that Pethedine, Pethilorfan and, particularly, epidurals all inhibit the baby's sucking ability. This inhibition may last up to two months. Obviously, a sleepy baby not feeding well has an effect, which may be considerable, on the parent/child interaction. Visual response and also muscular co-ordination can be affected, as is the rate at which the baby becomes accustomed to loud noises, bright lights etc. A current study at Cambridge seems to show that differences in infant handling and interaction were still apparent, after one year, between women who'd received heavy doses of Pethilorfan and those who hadn't. It seems unlikely that any drug will be found, in the near future at least, which while sedating the woman, isn't going to affect the highly vulnerable nervous system of the newborn. Pethedine should certainly not be taken too near the end of the first stage, otherwise you'll be dozey just when you want to be wide-awake and alert to push out the baby. 'It is more difficult to control the impulse towards flight and to create conscious and positive entering into labour if Pethedine is given' (Sheila Kitzinger). It's even more important not to continue with gas and oxygen into the second stage, especially if it's your first time and you don't know how it will affect you, otherwise this might happen.

I took a few lungfuls of gas. My body became a mass of tingling sensations - everything got blurred and the contraction passed with me totally out of control and unaware of what was happening.

Or - even worse -

When a nurse said to me 'I'll show you how to use the gas', I made the worst mistake possible and breathed hard into the machine so that I completely went out. I had hallucinations and was conscious of screaming and screaming.

At the end of the second stage, as the baby's head is about to crown, a cut is made, almost routinely, in most hospitals, in the woman's perineum.

I asked if I could give birth naturally, but was told that the hospital's policy was to make an incision and there could be no variation from this for an individual woman's whims.

This routine cut may well not be necessary. It is done for speed (theirs, not yours), and convenience (theirs, not yours), and once again, the patient is not consulted - although it's your body that is being hacked about. This episiotomy has to be stitched - sometimes not for an hour or more after delivery, and the stitching is often done by a handy student learning to suture, not necessarily an obstetric student. One midwife I know insists that, on the rare occasions when she has found an episiotomy necessary, it be stitched only by an obstetric student. This process - accepted and taken absolutely for granted by many women nowadays - can be the most painful part of the entire labour and the effects of the cut felt by the woman for many months. A survey on this subject by the National Childbirth Trust found that one third of their sample complained of pain at the time of stitching, one third had been sutured without local anaesthetic and 15% of those who'd had an anaesthetic said the doctor didn't wait until it took effect. A typical comment was 'The stitching was far worse than the whole of labour'. There is, still, despite a very good booklet by Sheila Kitzinger and the National Childbirth Trust, very little understanding of or interest in, on the part of male doctors, the importance and sensitivity of the vagina and perineum to women; not only in their immediate comfort after birth, but in their sexual lives which may be badly affected for some time, mainly because of physical discomfort, but also because of

the psychological feelings about the damaged vagina, which they'd obviously feel unable to talk to their doctor about. Midwives, who would, on the whole, be much more sympathetic, are not allowed to do suturing. In domiciliary confinements, episiotomy is very rare. In a gentle, tranquil atmosphere, a midwife, with only one patient to attend to, and a relaxed woman can work together to bring out the baby's head naturally and slowly. Peace and an unhurried atmosphere are rarely present in hospital, which I think is a major reason for forceps deliveries becoming so much more common. In some hospitals, particularly in the London area, they account for as many as 60% of all births. Forceps (like sugar tongs clamped either side of the baby's head) should be used when the mother is very tired or not making progress or if the baby is becoming tired. But forceps often seemed to be used as just another routine way of hurrying things along. Perhaps the woman is so overwrought, either through lack of sympathetic help, or through being moved from place to place as if she's part of a conveyer belt system, that she can no longer find energy and resources sufficient to push her baby out unaided. Needless to say, forceps are very seldom needed when a baby is born at home. It's interesting to note that here in Yorkshire, at least one modern maternity unit isn't equipped for even the routine of a forceps delivery, and a friend of mine, needing one, had a half hour ambulance ride in the middle of the night to the nearest 'proper' hospital. She had most particularly wanted a home confinement and had been refused but I cannot see at all the advantage that a maternity unit, as opposed to a hospital, has over your own bedroom. In fact, the irony of that situation was that undoubtedly in her own home, she'd not have needed a forceps delivery anyway!

It would really take another article to continue with the problems encountered after birth, breastfeeding, hospital procedures that seem to ignore the desire of most parents to establish a relationship with their child right from its birth. There are still hospitals where fathers cannot handle their child at all and mothers only at feeding time. All I

can suggest, as a way of combating any process that you don't want to be involved in, is just to get yourself really well informed and certain of your wishes and rights. This only works for those of us with massive self confidence, access to the right kind of books etc. But maybe there will be some changes. I've just read an article while I've been finishing this, in *The Practitioner* (June 1974), which puts out a feeler in the right direction. The article is a survey of women forced into home confinements by the ancillary workers strike in 1973. The authors found that 80% of the mothers would want their next child to be born at home. They 'are led to suggest that 100% hospital delivery may not be in the best interests of some mothers'; also, that '..more research into client preferences of maternity services is needed and the social and psychological rewards to the mother of childbirth should be weighed more critically with medical criteria'. They also noted, 'It is often pointed out by supporters of women's rights that gynaecologists are overwhelmingly male and that male values tend to be the dominant ones projected'. Which made it seem to me a thoughtful and hopeful article, and it has certainly provided a more hopeful (well, slightly more hopeful) conclusion, than the one I had previously written!

Christine Beels
1974

Amended version of a paper first given at the Sexual Politics Conference, held in Leeds in March 1974.

Why I laughed when Anna was born

When Anna was born, when her blue head pushed out face downwards between my thighs, before she even turned her head round towards my left thigh ready to push her shoulders out, she opened her mouth and cried, her head turned from blue to red and I laughed - I laughed the same laugh that I have since sometimes laughed after orgasm. It is not a pretty laugh, it frightens Anna ('Don't make love. Please don't make that noise. I can't stand it) and also my lover. It is a laugh of power, the strength of life flowing throughout my body. The words I want to use to describe this laugh look ridiculous written down and explain nothing. Which was why I thought I would write the story of Anna's birth; only now I find that I have to start even further back and talk about the birth of my first baby, a breach baby who died a few hours after birth. I cry now when I think of that birth, ten years ago, so why it must be told to explain a laugh eighteen months later I do not really know.

But though it is a sad story, it is not at all like all the accounts of pain and screaming that I'd read in so many stories and, perhaps, this is because I never identified with those stories, never felt that they had anything to do with the way I would have a baby, even when I was fifteen and knew nothing about the stages and processes of labour.

Five years later when I was twenty and seven months pregnant, I still knew hardly anything about the process of labour and learnt nothing from the hospital. At seven months I started going to relaxation classes a la Dick Read with a lady who lived nearby, but as the baby was born when I was eight months and one week pregnant I never finish-

ed those classes.

I started labour the night after I'd been to the antenatal clinic and been shown an X-ray picture that showed conclusively that the baby's feet were stuck up near its head and that there was no possibility of it turning round now - it would be born bottom first.

It was between one and two o'clock in the morning when Andrew and I arrived at the hospital. I had very slight contractions but they were every minute - that was the way they started; I'd been told to call the ambulance when contractions were about every two minutes. I was admitted into the hospital; a nurse put her hand on my stomach and said I was in false labour but it was too late to send me home now; I might as well stay the night and go home in the morning. They sent Andrew home. I had been going to insist he stay with me right the way through the birth but if I were not going to give birth that night and was going home tomorrow undelievered, what was the good of his hanging about all night?

I was given a bath and my pubic hair shaved (why if I was going home in the morning?) but they didn't bother with the enema, thank God. Then I was put on a hard, narrow bed in the delivery room as they were full up everywhere else; I was given two sleeping pills and told to go to sleep. But I couldn't sleep because, although I was not in any pain, I felt uncomfortable, partly because of the strange surroundings and the hard bed, but also because I had the same sensations I sometimes get at the beginning of a period.

Some hours later another woman was brought into the delivery room and gave birth to a daughter after what seemed hours of screaming. By this time I was feeling very uncomfortable and had hardly slept at all. I kept tossing and turning on the hard bed - if it had been a period and I had been at home, by this time I would have been walking up and down the room as it's the only thing that makes me feel better, but there is hospital I didn't dare.

Soon, another nurse came and examined me and gave me an injection of (I think) Pethedine. She said it was to

help me to sleep. I was not told at any time that I was now in true labour and the baby would be born that night, but somehow, very hazily because I was sleepy and bewildered, I knew. Anyway, the injection certainly sent me to sleep - I must have slept for about two hours and when I awoke (about seven or eight in the morning), I was still in a drugged condition. I felt very pleasant, I was almost floating; gone was the discomfort of earlier and in its place was a great rolling and heaving motion that seemed to me like a wave rolling into shore, rising high, holding itself, then breaking on the beach, its water rolling backwards into the sea to be overtaken by another breaker poised above it. The whole sensation was effortless, I was almost like a spectator, relaxed and drowsy. It was only after about three of these heaves that I realised something that woke me up instantly - the baby was being born, its bottom was pushing itself out, it was so soft that it was meeting with no resistance. I called for attention (in my panic I forgot about the bedside bell) and soon I was surrounded by people. I was no longer in charge of my labour, there were no longer any pleasant sensations; I was dragged down the bed and my legs were draped over something hard; I could see surgical instruments, they were obviously going to cut me. My reaction was irrational, obviously in these circumstances an episiotomy was necessary but I'd been so determined that I wasn't going to be cut that I began to object. Gas and air was pushed onto my face; whether they thought I was in pain and needed anaesthetics or whether they thought it was the easiest way to keep me quiet I don't know; but I felt I was suffocating, I tried to push the mask away but it was held firmly and by the time I was free it was all over. I had a glimpse of a blue, blood-stained baby and then there was silence. No, it was worse than silence; all the people who had been so insistently with me an instant before had all withdrawn to the other side of the room; I was left entirely alone, I've never been so alone in my life, alone and empty, still strapped up on the bed and I could hear them whispering over on the other side of the room. The baby made not a sound.

Then a young doctor appeared beside me; he said he was sorry, the baby was poorly - it was a boy, what name had I chosen? The question astonished me, I said I hadn't thought of a name yet; he was gently insistent, please choose one. I said I didn't think it was very important at the moment, I was more concerned about what was wrong with the baby and would he live? He didn't answer either of my questions but said the baby had to have a name so he could be christened as he was so poorly. I was very angry, I don't know how I had the strength but I was. I told him not to christen the baby but tell me what was wrong. He was very vague, they didn't know, he wasn't breathing properly, he'd need an oxygen tent and he might not live. Then he disappeared.

In all the ten days I was in hospital I never got a satisfactory answer to my questions. After the baby died (about midnight that night) one nurse I asked said there had been something wrong with his lungs, but all the doctors I asked were very evasive. I only found out the true cause of death when I read the death certificate they gave me as I left the hospital - the baby died of brain haemorrhage and his death was obviously caused by his birth.

I have to pause there - I can't go straight into the story of Anna's birth. I had to pause in life too. But when I knew I was pregnant again there was one thing I was adamant about from the beginning. I wasn't going into hospital this time, the baby was going to be born at home and I should know what was happening at each stage and remain in control of the process (to this end I went to natural childbirth classes). And there was one thing I was afraid about - it was a tremendous relief when the baby turned in the womb (turned is the wrong word - she did acrobatics - I had two knots in the cord to prove it) and the head engaged.

Also I had one misconception. I thought that as the first baby was born three weeks early that this one would

be too. The result was that about a week before it was due, I was expecting to go into labour at any minute and sat at home and waited, yes, just literally waited for about a week or so; and then I got bored and went out every night, at first almost fearfully, expecting to give birth in the middle of the theatre or pub, but later with the conviction that I was not after all going to have a baby after all, I was going to be hugely and monstrously pregnant for the rest of my life.

But after all, when I was about eight or nine days overdue, I woke up in the middle of the night, felt small regular contractions and thought with relief, 'Well, that's started' and went back to sleep again.

But I don't want to give the impression that this was a perfect birth and everything was beautiful from the beginning. For it certainly didn't seem like that when I woke up again. It was about nine o'clock in the morning and I couldn't feel any contractions at all but I could feel a frightening pain right across the tops of my thighs and my cunt. I lay rigid and woke Andrew up.

There's something terribly wrong with me. I've got this awful pain and I don't know what it is.

He got me to show him where the pain was and asked how much it hurt.

Well, sometimes it's worse than others - it comes and goes.

He asked me to tell him when it started, when it stopped, when it started again. It was regular, lasting about a minute every two minutes. He was going to phone the midwife. I begged him not to, I said I wasn't in labour, there were no contractions, she would think I was so silly if I called her for nothing, she would be angry. But he went all the same.

All this time I'd been lying rigid, denying with all my body that I was in labour. As soon as Andrew left, I relaxed, I suddenly knew I was in labour after all, the pains slackened. When the midwife's nurse came about half an hour later, she confirmed that labour had started, she could feel small contractions but there was no urgency.

She gave Andrew instructions on what to get ready and said she would ask the midwife to come round later in the day. She was ready to leave when she suddenly changed her mind and decided to give me an internal examination. I was nearly fully dilated.

She went to call the midwife immediately while Andrew got things ready. When the midwife came, Andrew made a pot of coffee and they all three sat on the bed and we drank coffee and chatted. The midwife said I was nearly dilated but not to push just yet. I didn't actually feel any urge to push but found the breathing pattern I'd been taught to distract the mind from the desire to push actually helped to distract my mind off the slight pain I still felt and anyway the deep breathing patterns normally used during the first stage of labour didn't make sense as I still couldn't feel any contractions.

Then the midwife said it would be alright for me to push now. I felt no urge at all to push and it felt like a terrible anti-climax, almost a failure but she just said to wait until I did feel like it. So we sat and waited and to me it seemed an eternity though it was probably only a few minutes. And then I felt a push coming but I was so eager I completely mismanaged it and it had little effect. But no-one said anything and the next push I felt was overwhelming. There was no question of me wasting this one. My whole body seemed concentrated in one big movement and I felt so powerful and then afterwards I felt so peaceful. Now a pattern established itself. While I was pushing I couldn't imagine I'd ever be doing anything else, everything, the whole world was concerned with this great effort, but also I felt so strong, a superwoman with superhuman strength. And afterwards, in between the pushes, I couldn't imagine any other state but complete languour, I felt completely incapable of expending any energy but when the time came to push again I would be ready and rested. While I was pushing my face must have gone red with effort and as I relaxed afterwards, my breath came out with a sigh and moan not of pain but of effort; my muscles shook with fatigue and then as the delicious

languour crept up I actually slept for a few seconds before I awoke to concentrate the rising power and strength.

Weaving through these alternating states of consciousness, I was aware of Andrew and the midwife and the nurse continuing their conversation. I heard it in snatches and it was at the same time very close and interesting yet taking place in a different world. They were talking about the appalling pay and conditions of nurses and Andrew was saying they should go on strike.

Then the midwife saw the head coming; I pushed two or three more times and then it was ready to crown. I don't remember now if the midwife told me to push gently, no need for effort because that is what happened anyway quite naturally. My breath was coming shallowly now, instead of pushing it was more like putting the brakes on, the head slowly, slowly pushing out and then the moment of crowning.

I think I stopped breathing, I almost think my heart stopped. Anyway, the world seemed to stop. I felt I was being torn wide open. It was awful, wonderful but terrible at the same time. That is the one moment in childbirth that I would find it difficult to live through again. I remember it with fear but it lasted no time at all and it was not pain I felt. And I was whole, I didn't tear, there was no damage. It was a perfect crowning and Anna pushed her blue head out and began to cry.

So when I laughed, perhaps it was just a laugh of hysteria and relief after that moment of crowning, but I don't think so. I laughed because I had felt so strong and wonderful pushing out this new life and here it was, still inside me apart from its head, already making its own voice heard. This wasn't a one-woman show but a woman and baby combination. The baby had contributed as much to her birth as I had. It was already an independent individual making its own demands. In some awesome way, I was a bridge, a gateway between living and not-living. And here was this person halfway through the gate, bawling its head off and yet I could still feel the rest of its body inside me, unborn yet.

But all that happened more than eight years ago and I', probably exaggerating, certainly romanticising. Moreover, I'm sure I'm attributing to that occasion emotions I've had in other circumstances - emotions not so easy to state because whereas in childbirth the result is easy to see, the new life is palpably present, the surging strength pushes something concrete into being, in orgasms the power is felt, the striving is there, the joy, the strength of life - but what has been created, what is the result? Perhaps when I laugh in orgasm there is a note of bitterness (is this why Anna hates it so much?) - I will repeat this moment again and again, I will feel the wonder, the communication and closeness with the other person but it is ephemeral. That is why it must be repeated, clutched at again and again.

But Anna's birth is an experience complete, whole in itself. I have no need to repeat it. It had its issue and there is Anna, a lively, noisy, demanding eight year old to show for it. We worked together that morning to push a new life into the world and now it is hers, all hers to shape herself.

Jan Wallis
1974



Punitive Attitudes to Contraception \Rightarrow Abortion

Social acceptance of abortion has been growing during recent years; but precisely because of this, the spectrum of opinion has never been so wide. As more people come to accept the justice and humanity of our appeal for the right to freely available abortions, so at the same time, the groups which object to abortion, on various principles, react by hardening their attitudes and toughening their propaganda campaigns. Only a few years ago 'abortion' was a taboo subject in this country: now most people will have come across at least a superficial outline of some of the different arguments in the debate - campaigning on both sides has become increasingly vigorous, and it's no longer easy for anyone to keep a detached, open-minded attitude. So people polarise; and this ambivalence and conflict in society in general tends to be mirrored in the conflicts in the minds of women needing abortions.

The anti-abortion campaigns rely largely on dramatic - indeed traumatic - emotional appeals rather than on reason argument. So on a theoretical and objective level they are comparatively easy to reject or ignore. But knowing a statement is untrue does not necessarily prevent it having an emotional effect. I believe that when a woman is herself faced with the need for an abortion, all the propaganda about 'murdered foetuses' and so on - the propaganda which she's supposedly dismissed - in fact contributes to a recoil from the process of abortion (which she may not be prepared to admit) and a reluctance to try to cope with it. In other words, at this very vulnerable point, a woman is the victim not only of the moralistic and pun-

itive attitudes of people around her, but also of often unrecognised (so more damaging) punitive reactions within herself.

This means she may be watching like a hawk for any hint of disapproval from her family or from the medical profession, because, quite without realising it, a small part of her *wants* this reaction and welcomes it as appropriate. (publicity has made us all increasingly aware of the attitudes of doctors, psychiatrists, social workers, families, friends and neighbours towards someone who is seeking an abortion, and just how unsupportive some of them can be. Many examples are detailed in the pamphlet *Women and Abortion*). But at the same time she is all the more *afraid* of disapproval because it would serve to reinforce her own disapproval of her chosen course of action. If a doctor or an agency seems to be reluctant to tell her very much about the technicalities of the operation, she will read into this all the rumours she half remembers about what a terrible physical experience it is, together with mental pictures of blood and pain and medieval torture instruments. Then, on top of all this, she can feel depressed and guilty about her apparent inability to be rational about it, and to dismiss what she knows quite well to be untruths and morbid fantasies. Unfortunately, even any questioning, by counsellor or doctor, about whether she believes she is doing the right thing, however necessary it may be (to ensure that no-one is pressuring her to have an abortion against her own wish) and however sympathetic the questioner, also reinforces her own doubts.

Similar pressures apply to contraception. Internal moralistic attitudes to sex may colour a woman's attitude to contraception; the foundations of these are laid at an early age. The vast majority of children grow up subjected to very contradictory moral conditioning about sex. The earliest anti-sex propaganda comes probably, when they are told 'not to play with themselves' at the age of two or three. Throughout their formative years, children take in quite different sets of values, all opposed to one another. As the values remain entirely theoretical until the first

sexual experience reinforce one or the other, they are all, for the time being, accepted.

Without going into all the contributory factors, I've grouped these attitudes under four headings:

1. Sex is wrong. This is the first attitude for many children and it starts when the child is taught that anything associated with the genitals is 'rude', 'dirty' etc.
2. Sex is wrong-but-fun; the salacious enjoyment of the forbidden.
3. Sex is romantic; when and only when it's connected with Love and Marriage and the Right Man.
4. Sex is natural and enjoyable. Some children never get offered this alternative at all.

In most adults, some or all of these quite contradictory sets of values still exist at different levels, unreconciled. It's quite easy for a mother who believes that she enjoys sex and that she is 'sexually emancipated' to pass on, nevertheless, to her children the idea that sex is dirty, thus perpetuating the existing conflicts.

The relevant point for us is that, of those conflicting moral standpoints in the mind of an adolescent girl reaching her first sexual experiences, only the last (that sex is simply enjoyable) is at all conducive to the idea of taking contraceptive measures before heterosexual sex. If you think of sex as romantic, then coupled with the Right Man and After the Wedding Bells, you get Radiant Maternity and Feminine Fulfilment. And if you think of sex as wrong, in any context, whether it's dirty or wicked, 'forbidden fruit', or wrong outside marriage, you aren't inclined to use contraception because you don't want to admit (to yourself) that you actually intend to have sex. And I think, here, that we tend to forget how widespread is the belief, in adolescence, that sex is wrong; as one grows older, the fact that sex is enjoyable reinforces the view that it's right and natural.

Even after the belief that sex is wrong has been rejected from a woman's personal, moral structure, it may still deter her from seeking contraceptive advice, for two reasons. First, especially in adolescence, she may identify doctors and social workers with the authoritarian, moral views that she is rejecting. If the doctor symbolises something you're rebelling against, you don't go to him for help with that rebellion.

Secondly, she may be afraid of getting moral lectures from doctors or clinic staff. This is despite (indeed, because of) any amount of reassuring propaganda which states just the opposite. I'll illustrate this by analogy. In my teens, I kept meeting statements like 'masturbation isn't harmful'; 'Don't believe anyone who tells you masturbation is bad' etc. I never actually came across any book or person who said it *was* harmful. Nevertheless, it took me fifteen years to throw off the suspicions engendered by all that reassurance. In the same way, a leaflet that tells you that a clinic won't disapprove if you're unmarried, or that you have no need for embarrassment, often encourages precisely the atmosphere of disapproval and embarrassment which it is striving to avoid. Nobody bothers to say they won't disapprove of something unless they expect you to think they *will* disapprove; and this tells you that disapproval is the expected reaction.

In any case, changes in one's attitude or beliefs do not necessarily bring about changes in one's practice. If a habit of passive acceptance has grown from a romantic fantasy of impromptu ravishing, a decision to take more sexual initiative will not automatically break this habit at once. And a woman with three children who decides she doesn't want any more may nevertheless delay in seeking contraceptive advice because she is simply not used to the need for it.

Unfortunately, an unwanted pregnancy, and maybe an abortion, will tend to reinforce or re-introduce, for a while, the feeling that sex is bad or wrong; 'look at the awful consequences'. Thus a woman may shy

away from any sexual contact for a period, sometimes for several months, after having an abortion. She is very likely to be feeling guilty about the need to have an abortion, and attaches this guilt either simply to having had sex, or to not having used contraception, or not having used it successfully. She may have believed that 'it won't happen to me'; and this, I believe is often connected with a fifth attitude to sex, which I hesitate to group with the former four, because it's not really about the sex act (fucking or lovemaking) at all:

5. Sex is for producing babies.

This line is much favoured by many writers of so-called 'sex education' pamphlets, who apparently hope that with the addition of a chapter on contraception, all will be made clear and no-one need any longer get pregnant through ignorance of 'the facts'. Actually, of course, the descriptions in most of these pamphlets are so unlike the real experiences that anyone is likely to have, that sex as she knows it, and 'baby production' can easily occupy separate, water-tight compartments in a woman's mind. Objectively, she knows about it, subjectively, it doesn't impinge upon her experience. But it contributes to her sense of guilt if she gets pregnant accidentally; she can't believe she 'didn't know' about sex and pregnancy.

If, on the other hand, she is aware of contraceptive techniques and the need for them, and has been using contraception, she has probably believed that her method worked and that its failure must be due to her own inefficiency. Contraceptive information and advertising, where they exist, usually give the impression that it's pretty infallible. So whatever the circumstances a woman is likely to think of an accidental pregnancy as *her fault*. This makes for a very tricky situation in which to talk about future contraception, because any such approach, whether by a doctor or even by a close friend, is likely to confirm her own self-punitive attitude towards her failure to use effective contraception in the past. And, simultaneously, the impulse to avoid sex may make her disinclined to consider contraception at all.

What can one conclude from these examples of the effects of people's moral attitudes? One fairly obvious conclusion is to re-emphasise the vital importance of a sensitive approach to women who are being subjected to these pressures. We are sympathetic to women under external pressures, from hostile doctors, shocked family, and so on, because we can see the pressures and their effects. We need to recognise, too, the pressures we don't see, which may be affecting most the apparently organised and determined women; pressures which are perhaps responsible for some of the 'reaction' some doctors claim to have found, and which they use as an argument against abortion, but which in fact, is a *result* of these very arguments.

But sensitivity to the symptoms of pressure is not enough. This sort of analysis makes us aware that freely available contraception and abortion, when we achieve them, will not, on their own, solve the problem. The extent of the purely practical, technical difficulties is such that we would become pre-occupied with the means rather than the end - with the number of clinics rather than the women who need them - which is, in fact, the very charge we make against the NHS. Any pressure group is vulnerable in this way; so it is important for us to remember the need for a total re-orientation of values in the whole of our society, as well as for the practical provision of much-needed facilities.

Because of this, there is a need for greater emphasis to be put on our aim of establishing community self-help projects; pregnancy testing, counselling, women's health centres and ultimately, if it becomes possible, abortion clinics. Services of this kind are drastically needed in any case, because of NHS inadequacy; but one objective in offering women an alternative to the subjugating atmosphere of the NHS is to encourage them to take the initiative in the control of their own lives, and to assist them when they come up against the red tape and blank walls of the present.

system. A campaign aimed at self-help can raise everyone's awareness of our (very much under-estimated) ability to come together and to initiate for ourselves many of the changes we need, thereby freeing ourselves from all the pressures of other people's values; first in the limited area of contraception, abortion, health and welfare, but, growing from this, in the basis and structure of the whole of society. A concentration purely on the demand that existing authorities *provide facilities for us* does nothing about the psychological pressures which are inherent in the present structure; and only perpetuates the division of the society into those with power and the rest of us who are dependent on their decisions rather than on our own choices.

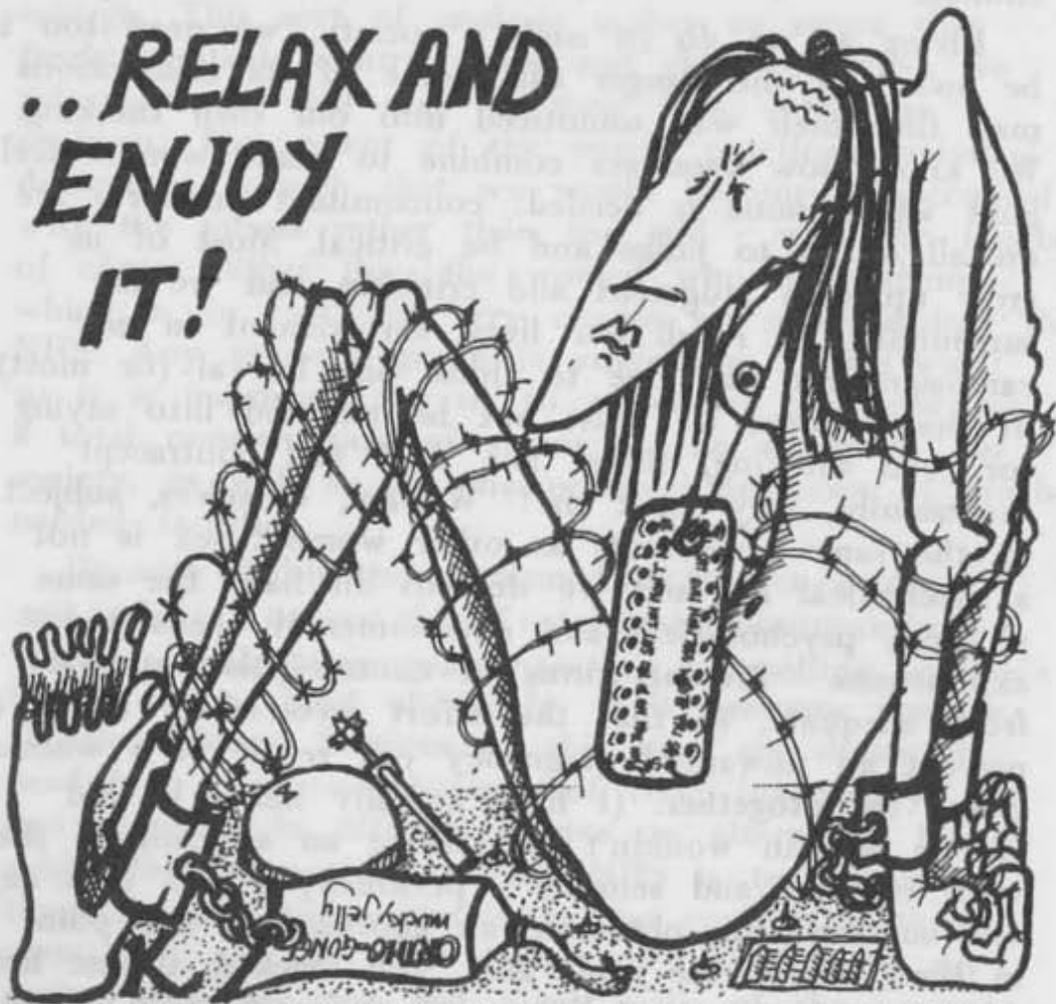
Living as we do in such a society, we need too to be aware of the danger that some of its assumptions may find their way unnoticed into our own thinking. We know how pressures combine to make women feel guilt where none is needed: concomitant pressures are on all of us to judge and be critical. Most of us grow up with judgment and criticism and we are surrounded by it all our lives. Involvement in any campaign can lead one to think one has all (or most) of the answers; we must not be tempted into saying (or even thinking) things like 'If I can contracept successfully, why can't she?' We are, ourselves, subject to the same constraints as other women; sex is not a mechanical act and we do not all have the same physical, psychological and environmental needs and experiences. Present forms of contraception are far from adequate, so that the effort involved in trying to prevent an unwanted pregnancy can result in a woman giving up altogether. (I have actually heard it said that a woman wouldn't be seeking an abortion if she were efficient and sensible - personally I feel that anyone successful in obtaining an abortion at this point in time, where the odds are still stacked against her, deserves warm congratulations of the sort more often offered to women continuing unwanted pregnancies to term.)

We must avoid the temptation of becoming a moral pressure group instead of a political force for freedom of choice. It is all too easy to play the role of expert. What we must aim to achieve instead is real communication and support. As women, we have the chance to support each other as we begin to choose to refer our lives to values beyond the simple level of automatic response to approval and disapproval. This is the real challenge.

Katy Jennison and Hilda Bartle

Amended version of a paper given at the Women's Abortion and Contraception Campaign Conference in Liverpool in 1973.

**.. RELAX AND
ENJOY
IT!**



Abortion Accounts

How can compulsory child-bearing be justified by a society which calls itself 'democratic'?

Women cannot even begin to fight for freedom until at the very least we can control our bodies. Here are the stories of one woman who had an abortion before the Abortion Act of 1967 and of two-women's experiences after the Act - we all three belong to the Bristol Women's Liberation Group, but we are sure that almost every woman in our society has had experiences of unwanted pregnancies, back-street abortions or has been refused applications for abortions on the NHS.

The situations we are describing are not going to change until contraception is freely available to ALL women and new forms of absolutely safe contraceptives have been developed (Prostaglandins, the once a month Pill, could soon be available to women but are seen as a threat to the medical companies who now make millions out of the conventional Pill that has to be taken every day and changes the hormonal balance of the woman's body). Women must also have access to safe, free abortions - using the Karman Vacuum suction abortion in the first 11 weeks of pregnancy - on an out-patient basis.

Abortion - guilty or not guilty?

When I was 20 years old and living away from home in a bedsitter, I found to my dismay that I was pregnant. The father was a man with whom I had had a fairly continuing relationship for several years - a man who was by way of being a friend as well as 'boyfriend'. I knew I couldn't face marriage and a baby with a man who felt trapped by my pregnant state, and that any kind of firm commitment with

this particular man would be doomed to failure in those circumstances. I didn't particularly want a baby; in fact I didn't want a baby. I had far too many interesting things still to do with my life and the role of housewife and mother didn't appeal to me.

At that time abortion was not legal in this country, except for those people who could afford a hundred to a hundred and fifty pounds for a Harley Street operation. We didn't come into that category! The only kind of abortion which was realistic in our case was an illegal, back-street job.

When we had finally decided that I was definitely pregnant and had made up our minds what we wanted to do about it, we made contact with someone who could help. I never knew the name of the woman who did it - with a syringe and carbolic soap in the middle of a bright October afternoon. That part wasn't horribly painful, only very uncomfortable and with one sharp pain. Within a couple of hours I had started losing a small amount of blood and by late evening the loss was well-established. At that stage I had only what amounted to a period pain with some backache. I dozed once or twice during the night but by 3 a.m. I was wide awake and losing a lot of blood. It was at least another four hours before the foetus came away - it looked more like a baby than I had expected. I remained in a good deal of pain, however, and after another couple of hours it became obvious that a doctor was needed. When I had been taken to hospital by ambulance, it was found that I must have been more than 12 weeks pregnant, and the placenta had to be removed by a doctor in Casualty, who left me in no doubt about his view of my 'immoral' behaviour.

In fact, I never felt guilty about the abortion. I took the decision after careful consideration of all the avenues open to me, and I felt then, as I do now, that it was the right thing for me to do. My only regret has always been that it was necessary for me to have a dangerous, illegal operation in order to retain

freedom of choice over my own future.

Some years after this, and while it was still not possible to get an abortion legally except in rare cases, I was living near a friend who had several young children. She had become pregnant again and was very upset about it as she didn't see how she could possibly cope with another child, either on her husband's wage as a skilled worker, or in the flat in which they lived. In desperation she decided to have a back-street abortion, and, although I wasn't happy about it, I said I would help with the kids if necessary, and tried to be cheerful and encouraging.

The next morning the husband came and fetched me at 6 a.m. He had been up all night and had waited as long as possible but now he felt he must get medical help. His wife was haemorrhaging badly and I went to see what I could do. She was losing large clots of blood, and there was a sheet already soaking in the kitchen sink. I spent the next half hour or so mopping up blood and trying to be reassuring. I had myself given birth twice by then but I had never seen so much blood and we were both badly frightened. She was taken to hospital, where she was given blood transfusions, put on a drip, and given fifteen minute blood pressure and temperature checks. This terrible experience, together with that of the abortion I had myself undergone, persuaded me, more than anything, that all women should be able to choose to have properly performed abortions with no cost to themselves, physically, emotionally or financially.

No-one has been able to put a figure to the number of illegal operations performed before the 1967 Abortion Act, but a realistic assessment is considered to be one hundred thousand every year. This is largely based on the number of patients admitted to hospital in need of treatment. But there are, or were, many women who never receive medical attention at any time during or after a back-street abortion and I think any estimate made by the authorities is likely to be an under-

estimate.

There is a lot of pressure on women who have abortions, whether legal or illegal, to make them feel guilty about 'destroying a life'. Even though the birth of an unwanted baby may mean a poorer, harder life for other children in the family; although it may mean a mother's sanity, or worsened living conditions, one is still supposed to tear oneself to shreds regretting it. I believe that most of this guilt is the result of conditioning by this society. That sometimes it may be the expression of the person's conditioning that sex has to be paid for, if not with the prospect of hell-fire, then at least with a lifetime of grinding poverty and service to the needs of the young.

Certainly, until contraception is 100% safe and trouble-free, abortion should be seen as an important last resort, provided free by the State on the decision of the woman and not according to the religious principles of her general practitioner. I think it has importance for Women's Liberation as a demand because if the State does provide it in this way, it becomes socially acceptable and it will all the sooner be guilt-free, and more particularly, women will begin to see their need for control over their own lives in other important areas also, such as employment and education.

Abortions are easy to get nowadays?

I was sitting in the hospital clinic, had just been told by the gynaecologist, an elderly man, silver-haired: 'Sorry, I cannot give you an abortion, we cannot help every woman who has become pregnant because of her own irresponsibility'. (What does he know about the pressures on women, sexual blackmail, fears felt by women, ignorance; he can quite smugly say that she, who all her life has been treated as an object without right of action or decision, should act 'responsibly' - what does he know about husbands throwing the woman's contraceptive on the fire after

scooping it out of her cunt with his finger, about men's assumptions that they are men only when they have the power to make their wives pregnant when they so wish, about women sleeping with men for a bit of human warmth and comfort, fleeing from loneliness?)

I was sitting there in the hospital crying my heart out in the little cubicle. Somehow I had been naive enough to think that I would naturally get an abortion. It had never occurred to me that some might see pregnancy as a fitting punishment for a woman's sexual escapade. And what of the child, should it also get punished? Well, you can have it adopted, they said coldly. Do they know what that means?' I was crying for what seemed like hours, I could have hanged myself for all the hospital staff knew or cared, nobody bothered to find out how I felt. It seems to me that at any other time, when a person is suffering from shock and crying hysterically, at least somebody would have shown some sympathy, but, because I was an 'immoral' woman who needed an abortion, I was treated as a pariah.

My own doctor had told me when I went to her for help: 'You have been a naughty girl!', although I am 32 years old and have borne two children already. (I had slept with another man than my husband and I thought that he had made me pregnant. In a real human community, it would not matter who was the father of a woman's child, because a child is a child is a child but in our patriarchal society, the child must show the same colour and shape as its 'legal' father, because in our society, it is the fatherhood of the child that makes it 'legal'. How can a child be 'illegitimate'? The child is always born out of a known mother, isn't that enough?

The Abortion Act of 1967 states that abortion is legal when the continuance of the pregnancy would involve more risk to the life of the pregnant woman or more injury to the physical or mental health of the

pregnant woman, or any existing children of her family, than if the pregnancy were not terminated. Many, or perhaps most, so-called 'normal' men would have left a woman who was expecting another man's child. If this had happened in my case, I would have been left alone with a child of ten and a baby and no means of livelihood except for Social Security benefit. Would that not have caused my children great distress and very likely have led to neurosis for me?

I was sent off to see a psychiatrist to prove to him that I was under great mental stress. I was expected to break down and cry, begging for mercy - yet another woman humiliating herself in front of a man-representative of repressive male institutions. I just couldn't do it! I told him of my life, full of upheavals and a childhood with an unsupported mother full of fearsBut because I appeared in emotional control of myself, he judged that I could do without the abortion. (Had he never heard of women and men, who, because they do not show their emotions but bottle them up within themselves, are often far more dangerous than those who just let go and cry? A woman, deserted by her second husband when pregnant with her third child, was denied an abortion, went back home and killed her two small children. Perhaps she didn't cry either?)

It was also obvious from the psychiatrist's attitude that he considered that women do not have sexual needs. When I told him that I had left my first husband about four years before I met the second man I married, he seemed surprised that I had had any sexual relationships with men during those years! What business has he to call himself a psychiatrist if he knows so little of human needs and behaviour?

Also, the fact that I was married seemed to be against me, even though there was a real risk of my becoming an unsupported mother because of this pregnancy. Unmarried girls, particularly if they are students, appear to get abortions far more easily. Once a woman

is married, she is seen as a man's responsibility and is left to his charge and whether she is beaten, destitute, continuously pregnant and ignorant of contraceptives is irrelevant. Unmarried mothers are an embarrassment to society while long-suffering wives are only part of our traditions.

I had wild fantasies of blowing up the clinic, murdering the gynaecologist or presenting him with the newborn baby: 'Here you are, you look after it!'. I thought of nurses, in revolt against male hierarchy at last, turning their attention to their sisters and setting up clinics, using their skills for giving women free contraceptives and abortions on demand. Almost all the work done in hospitals, from cleaning to nursing, is done by an army of women but, when women themselves need help in matters that upset their whole life, then there are no beds or help available. (What of the nurse who gave birth alone in her room and, when she found the child still-born, put it in a plastic bag and put it in the dustbin of the hospital incinerator room? She didn't want anybody to know!) What untold misery and loneliness of women!

I thought of parading outside the hospital, big-bellied, with a poster saying: 'I didn't want this child'. I wanted to find other women in my situation and together we would storm in demanding our rights as human beings to control our own bodies and lives.... but it all remained fantasies. I could have gone to a back-street abortionist but I had an experience in the first months of pregnancy that put fear into me of doing that; a friend brought a woman down from London to have a back-street abortion in Bristol. She stayed at my place, went to 'the woman', had contractions all night and bled so much that she was too weak to stand up. She haemorrhaged and was taken to hospital and almost didn't survive it. (What kind of society do we live in that women have to risk their lives for what should naturally be their right? How many women die this way every year? These women

are sacrificed by capitalist society that will go to any lengths to keep women as unpaid and cheap labour in and outside the home and the family). In the local clinic I heard of a girl, 18 years old or younger, who had been forced to continue her pregnancy. When the child was born it was mongoloid! It is only a very sick society that will condemn human beings to such experiences.

In the end I had to bear the child.

Abortions are easy to get nowadays?

'Congratulations' he said to my question of whether the pregnancy test was positive or not. What a terrible cliché that is. I couldn't believe it; we hadn't been particularly stupid, or anything like that, but when the pill scare was on some while ago, I gladly came off the pill (I'd had quite a lot of trouble with it) and we'd taken to using those relatively harmless rubbers again, all but twice that is - and here I was, pregnant again. The thought of living through another unwanted pregnancy seemed too much to bear, and this time there'd be my other child's welfare to consider. The poor thing was a bit too young to cope with a mother turned madwoman, I explained to the doctor. He was very good about it all, a practising christian (I've since found out); he didn't try to influence me in any way, but just made sure that I was sure, which I was.

For a second opinion, which is needed, I had to go to a local clinic to see some specialist or other. This was the worst part of it; they kept me waiting for hours; other de-knickered and de-stockinged women came and went, and I sat on, getting more and more hung up and paranoid. Eventually I plucked up courage to go to the desk and demand in a hysterical squeak why I hadn't been seen yet, I was the first there etc. Checked my name, yes, go into one of those cubicles and take your pants and stockings off - at this I broke down crying and screaming...I went and sat there, tears rolling down my face. What the hell am I

supposed to be doing in here? I'd rather be waiting outside than in this flowery box. A sort of mad rebellion got me, I picked up my bag and walked out, demanding to know what was going on. Two nurses looked at me, looked at each other, then looked ceilingwards; 'Go in there, take your pants and stockings off and wait till the doctor calls you.' I went back inside and practically tore the curtains down in my rage and hysteria. Eventually I saw the doctor, who agreed with my GP and myself that an abortion was best but they couldn't do it, they had no beds: 'I'm sorry'. She suggested having one done privately, they weren't very expensive - 'only about £40'. More tears and pleading to no avail; they'd write and tell my GP of their decision. The following day, assuming that he'd got their letter, I phoned him. The letter hadn't arrived, what had they said? 'The stupid cow said I couldn't have one', I said to my GP. Surprised, he said 'What? They can't do that, I'll get in touch with them. Ring me back on Friday'. When I did, the answer amazed me. 'You're going intohospital on Monday'. I was glad of the short wait (which really has to be for an abortion). I spent the weekend getting the baby fixed up and other things and had little time for changing my mind.

I cried in the waiting room when my husband left. I am terrified of hospitals and this would be the first operation I'd ever had; what would it be like? Would it hurt afterwards? The day was spent chatting with the other women, mainly D & C cauterisations (an operation very similar to termination, for the removal of vaginal ulcers) and hysterectomies; I'd never before realised how much women have to suffer because of their womanhood. There were two other women having abortions, which was a relief to me, and we talked quite openly about it. One's husband hadn't been bothered about contraception but walked out on her when she became pregnant - the other had three kids and was going to be sterilised at the same time. There

was little guilt or shame felt by us, or was it me reflecting my feelings on them (did I just assume they felt like this because I did?). The nurses referred to the subject in whispers or avoided talking about it to the others.

The operation lasted 'no more than 10 or 15 minutes'. When I woke up I was retching and some nurse was urgently telling me to breathe through my nose, which I did and then fell asleep again. The next time I woke up, my husband was sitting next to me and an orderly was asking me if I wanted some tea, 'cheese and onion pie'. I was as stiff as a board (the stiffness lasted for days) but hungry. I felt marvellous, a few hours ago I'd been pregnant and now I wasn't and nothing to show for it but a slight loss of blood. We were given no instruction before leaving of what we ought to do, or not to do. I felt so well that it didn't occur to me to take things easy or refrain from sex, so some days later, after a long and strenuous walk, I thought I was dying when I haemorrhaged quite heavily; that passed O K but when I started bleeding again a few days later, I panicked and found myself in a hospital in Taunton, hardly bleeding at all, to my embarrassment, for they'd treated me as an emergency case. Repeating my story to one medic after another, I got the same bigoted response: 'I didn't realise abortions were so easy to get in Bristol now' etc. I don't (didn't) care what they thought; not being at the mercy of the NHS now, my boot-licking had finished.

Compiled by Monica Sjoo using material by Betty Underwood, Carmen Davies and Monica Sjoo

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Medical Mystifications

It has long been known that the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness leaves a lot to be desired. The growth of groups like People not Psychiatry, the Mental Patients Union and the writings of Laing, Szasz and others have made an appreciable impact on people seeking psychiatric help. Many more people are now aware of the ways in which psychiatric treatment seeks to make 'deviant' people conform, and the way in which it sweeps suffering under the State carpet with a bottle of Librium, or electric shock treatment. But if we have a pain in our stomachs, or a rash on our hands we go to our GP's, on whom the mantle of scientific objectivity sits quite comfortably, and expect a value-free diagnosis and a handy prescription. As women, we approach our doctors in good faith, sincerely believing that our complaints will be taken seriously and that, were we men, our reception in the surgery would be no different. Although we may be well aware of the workings of sexism in psychiatry and in the whole question of abortion, we are not particularly well equipped to identify it in the diagnosis and treatment of physical illness. It would be a mistake to assume that medical science is any more free from traditional assumptions about female inferiority than any other so-called 'science'.

Here are some everyday examples: a woman approaches her doctor with an intolerable discharge and, rather than examine her, he asks her if she is 'promiscuous' and dismisses her with the curt advice to wash more frequently. (This happened to me.) A woman of 20 complains of frequent blinding headaches to her doctor. He prescribes a pain killer and tells her that it's just 'pre-wedding nerves'. Six months later she is dead, having had a brain tumour. A young mother complains to her doctor of itchy hands and arms. He tells her this is very common among new

mothers and that it's a result of her anxiety over her infant. He doesn't suggest an allergy test for Napisan or any other new product she's using. A woman complains to her doctor of depression and dizzy spells. While he's writing a prescription for Valium he perfunctorily asks her if she's worrying about anything. He doesn't note that she's taking the contraceptive pill and nor does he bother to check for anything else which might cause her condition.

These (and countless other) examples cannot be attributed to the shortcomings of the individual doctors concerned. These attitudes are endemic to the whole medical profession and are fundamental both to the teaching and practice of the great majority of doctors. Most disturbing of all is the complacency of the profession on these questions. Hooked on its own mystique, and with the aid of a top-heavy trade in boffins, the medical profession shores up its ignorance and continues to legitimise the outright oppression of women. The side effects of the contraceptive pill (debilitating headaches, nausea, loss of libido, thrombosis and death) are still described as 'minor'. Hysterectomies are performed for no other reason than that the junior surgeons need some practice (it is the second commonest operation in women and is often performed on relatively young women with *no* uterine disease, the justification being that they *might* develop some disease within ten years! - no serious consideration is being given, either, to the aftermath of this major operation, ranging from serious and long lasting depression to premature menopausal symptoms - see Jean Robinson's article on the subject in *Spare Rib* No. 30); safe early abortions are denied, forcing women into back street abortionists from which several die, and mass screening of women for early signs of breast cancer is not thought important enough to administer though it would save 11,500 deaths per year from breast cancer and 37,000 mastectomies per year, if the technology developed were made available.

Recognising that the sexist practice of medicine is not just fodder for high table talk, but devastatingly and sometimes fatally affects women's health, two doctors, Dr. Jean

Lennane and Dr. John Lennane, took the brave step of attacking that practice in a formal academic paper called *Alleged Psychogenic Disorders in Women - A Possible Manifestation of Sexual Prejudice* (New England Journal of Medicine, Feb. 1973). They describe the medical profession's approach to three specifically female conditions - painful periods (dysmenorrhea), nausea in pregnancy and pain in labour as 'inadequate and even derisory'.

Painful periods

It seems that some 50% of women suffer from painful periods but the medical attitude to this condition, even when it is so severe that it totally disrupts normal life is, at best, dismissive, and, at worst, dangerous. Although the condition follows its own characteristic course and is similar for all women suffering from it (i.e. an almost 'invariable pattern' occurring two years after menarche, when ovulation begins, and ceasing with the birth of the first child or at about 25 years of age, and being alleviated by the suppression of ovulation) the exact cause of the pain is still unknown. The medical literature on the subject totally rejects the obvious - that it has a physical cause, and instead attributes it to female deficiency in whatever guise most suits the practitioners' prejudice. For instance:

It is generally acknowledged that this condition is much more frequent in the 'high-strung', nervous or neurotic female than in her more stable sister (1)

Faulty outlook ... exaggeration of minor discomfort ... may even be an excuse to avoid doing something that is disliked (2)

... very little can be done for the patient who prefers to use menstrual symptoms as a monthly refuge from responsibility and effort ... management must be directed at the underlying psychodynamics (3)

However, the classic explanation for painful periods is that the *mother* is responsible:

A dysmenorrheic mother usually has a dysmenorrheic daughter (2) (original italics)

As the Lennanes point out, in any other condition, it would be assumed that heredity had something to do with it, but where women are concerned, it is assumed that *they* are at fault, and not their genetic make-up. So, immediately, there is a watertight medical 'refuge from responsibility and effort'; how much easier it is for the medical writers to dismiss female complaints, without *any* substantiating evidence, as the product of hysteria, neuroticism, faulty outlook, laziness etc, than it is to do some serious research, research which doesn't take as its starting point the assumption that women are a lower form of life.

The Lennanes point out that, both in dysmenorrhoea and nausea in pregnancy, there are 'organic etiological factors present', though, again, one would never guess it from the literature on either of the conditions.

Nausea in pregnancy

The results of treating nausea in pregnancy without prior thorough research are well known. Drug manufacturers and medical researchers must together be held responsible for the thalidomide tragedy, the first for exploitation and conspiracy, and the second for the savage neglect of female complaints which result in the indiscriminate prescribing of drugs, drugs which in no way are intended to cure or even treat the complaint, but which effectively prevent women from pestering their GP's. With this attitude prevailing, the way is clear for nausea in pregnancy to be attributed to the woman's 'resentment, ambivalence and inadequacy', her '.. irrationally exaggerated fear of the obstetric hazards facing her'. Strange that her inadequacy and irrationality only begins in the fifth/sixth week of pregnancy (often before she is even aware of her pregnancy!) and subsides around the 15th week, that she's more irrational in the morning than the evenings and that inadequacy is relieved by food - stranger still that ambivalence and resentment should cause the *same* symptoms in 88% of pregnant women. In fact:

The type of nausea and its usual duration are exactly mimicked by estrogen therapy and such nausea is a recognised

side effect of estrogen-containing oral contraceptives. Estrogen has been shown to be excreted in large amounts during pregnancy (Lennane)

Since thalidomide-type drugs have been discredited and while there is no research into its exact cause, women will have to endure nausea in pregnancy as just another 'minor' discomfort.

It is horribly clear that whenever a condition or complaint is exclusive female, special anti-female criteria are put into practice. The research, practice and *industry* of contraception is, perhaps, the most obviously sexist and, second to abortion, has the most devastating effects on women's lives and health.

The pill

In 1973 the pill was brilliantly whitewashed by the Royal College of General Practitioners' interim report *Oral Contraceptives and Health*. A member of the reporting Committee appeared on television and soothed any 'neurotic' woman's fears with the categorical statement, not that the pill carried specific dangers and increases the risk of 62 conditions, but that women who take the pill are *healthier* than those who don't. (We must never forget how powerful the drug manufacturers' lobby is and how much money is at stake!) Mr. Denis Hawkins, a consultant gynaecologist who directs the birth control clinic at one of the largest London teaching hospitals has stated 'Expediency comes into medical practice as it does everywhere else'. ('Expediency' in the use of the pill is the cause of 24 deaths per million user/years) We might assume that a man in his position and with such experience would know better, but he joins ranks with those who legitimise prejudice as scientific fact. I know it gets boring but he describes the documented side effects of the pill - depression, headaches, loss of libido etc. - as, you've guessed it, 'psychosomatic'. The whitewash report went further than this. It dismissed the reported side effects of the pill because it was *women* who were reporting them and, as all doctors are taught in their training, women are quite unreliable and irrational. Only one doctor, a woman, spoke out against the Report.

She has maintained that

Even without it showing, the pill is altering the hormone balance and so affecting the body's natural immunity and resistance to infection.

Her own research has shown her that headaches, depression, migraine

are caused by the biochemical and enzyme changes in the lining of the womb which are reflected in the blood vessels in the head and elsewhere.

A biochemist friend and full time researcher into hormones has told me that they remain one of the biggest mysteries in medical science. Such ignorance, however, doesn't prevent drug manufacturers from making a great deal of money, or doctors from telling women that they should be thankful for the wonder pill of the age and that the 'side effects' are the cross they must bear for being born female, neurotic and inferior.

But the last word on this must be left to Denis Hawkins, the expert on female inadequacy. When asked about the possibility of a male oral contraceptive, he felt that it would pose not only ethical but legal problems: 'we don't yet know whether tampering with the sperm would create abnormalities' and he asserted that 'men are sensitive about fears of impotence'. So who's neurotic?

Lee Comer

November 1974

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The statements of Denis Hawkins were taken from an article/interview by Carol Dix which appeared in *The Guardian*, November 6th 1974.

Vaginal Politics

About 50% of our population is female, and, because women have the babies, they can be expected to make rather more use of the health service than men during their fertile years. Women currently live longer than men, so will need more health care in their old age. Women have more mental illness than men (a point to which I shall return). They are also known to consult their GP's — either for themselves or their children — more often than men do.

Yet of 20,208 GP's in the National Health Service, only 2,388 are women. Of 23,478 total hospital medical staff, only 3,336 are women. Few women are involved in the actual running of the health service via hospital management committees or regional boards.

The whole structure of the health service is a pyramid, with power delegated downwards, not upwards. And those many women who do contribute greatly to the service we use — nurses, midwives, occupational therapists, health visitors — are where they have always been — at the bottom of the pile in terms of salary and of course influence.

At the top of the pile, then, is the Minister of Health, and, below him/her a great many career administrators — almost invariably men, and, of course, the doctors, particularly the hospital consultants. The latter are still easily the best-paid health service workers.

Traditionally, we see doctors as men and patients as women, and this can be confirmed by any casual glance through a medical journal, to see the sex of the patient invariably given tranquillisers by the (male) doctor in the drug companies' advertisements. One particular ad shows a harassed woman bent over a sink with a pile of dirty dishes. The caption tells the doctor — 'You can't solve her problems, but you can give her 'X' '. Too true, alas.

Doctors are only human. Some of them would like to help. But in a society which prefers to hand out tablets to a woman whose only problem is she's stuck with two small kids 24 hours a day, 365 days a year — rather than act as a matter of urgency to give her a break, what can they do? Particularly when, as men, most of them have only the haziest idea of just how lonely and demoralising this situation can be.

Phyllis Chesler, in her book, *Women and Madness*, argues that the high incidence of mental illness in women is the result of intolerable pressures put on them by society. Many women crack up during puberty, after childbirth or during the menopause. Doctors mutter about hormones and admit them to mental hospitals, where, often enough, they are given drugs or electro-convulsive therapy against their will.

But the scale of the problem surely indicates that it is not so simple. Doctors seem to know remarkably little about endocrinology (the study of hormones), in any case. But until more is known, what about social support for women at these vulnerable times? Or does the natural life-cycle of a female strike a male doctor as too 'mysterious', alarming, or trivial to merit serious attention?

Mental illness is not the only field where women's special interests are ignored. You'd think that any doctor would be shocked into action by the sight of a battered woman. Yet, when I visited Chiswick Women's Aid recently, I spoke to many women whose husbands had inflicted appalling injuries on them and their children for years with the full knowledge of their doctors. Typical was the lady, blind in one eye, covered in scars, who'd been told by her GP that 'of course, you can't leave him, because of the children'.

Thus women are subtly brainwashed into playing the role of 'patient victim', helpless in the face of 'natural' male aggression. In these cases it was the man who needed the medical treatment — but the woman who ended up going to the doctor. The same all too often applies with rape and mental cruelty.

Angela Kilmartin, who suffers from chronic cystitis, a particularly debilitating and painful complaint which affects mainly women, got so fed up with the attitudes of doctors that she started the U and I Club for fellow sufferers to help themselves by exchanging information and acting as a pressure group on the medical profession. Many of the letters she receives constitute a shocking indictment of the way doctors think about us.

Cystitis sufferers are variously told to 'go home, you're imagining it', 'learn to live with it', 'get pregnant — it will go away when you've had a baby', 'have another baby', and even, in one case, 'find another man to sleep with' (the woman was married!). Complaints that cystitis has so crippled her that she can't have sex, produce such gems as 'try going without for six months', and 'are you married?'

But there is one area of medicine that is *supposed* to concentrate on women — gynaecology, which is still the most popular option for would-be consultants, and where a fair number of them are even female themselves. Traditionally, the specialty was, of course, the province of midwives. But a couple of centuries ago, the men started to take an interest, from which time we have been privileged indeed. Or have we?

Gynaecologists had to be bulldozed into accepting the idea of contraception despite their intimate knowledge of the damaging effects of endless pregnancies upon a woman's health. They had little hand in the liberalisation of the abortion laws. And many of them still seem more concerned with telling us what to do than ensuring that we're well looked after when we've done it.

A qualification in Obstetrics and Gynaecology is supposed to mean that the doctor in question knows what can go wrong with our sexual and reproductive organs, and how to treat it, as well as simply how to deliver babies. The consultant gynaecologist in a hospital has a great deal of power, and, one would hope, a sense of responsibility to match. But the following are examples of what actually, all too often, happens.

A woman goes to see a handsome well-heeled gynaecologist about an NHS abortion. He doesn't offer her a seat. She's single, so he makes her feel so guilty about the whole thing that she starts to cry. He sees her once, briefly, after the operation, then hands over all 'aftercare' such as it is, to the registrar, while he sees his private patients.

A married woman with three children decides that she can't face the fourth that's on the way. Her gynaecologist makes sterilisation a condition of an abortion. She agrees, has the operation, and suffers thereafter from cystitis, due to hormone imbalance, which means she can't have sex any more. The doctor offers her no sexual counselling. A woman has a hysterectomy because of fibroids in the womb. After the operation, she is sent to walk around the ward and suddenly feels 'her insides giving way'. She tells the nurse, who tells her 'not to make such a fuss'. The gynaecologist discharges her. Ten days later she's re-admitted, in agony and with a high temperature. What she'd felt was her stitches coming apart.

A woman who's been in pain for months, and got no satisfaction from her GP, finally decides she's had enough and heads for the hospital to see the gynaecologist who delivered her child. He tells her 'yes there was thrush on your swab when we took it'. That was eighteen months ago, and nothing had been prescribed at the time.

A single girl wants a coil fitted and asks for a Copper 7 - the most suitable one for her. She is fitted with a shield, but the gynaecologist doesn't bother to tell her that he didn't have any Copper 7's handy. She bleeds for months before finally getting it removed and replaced.

A woman is asked how she feels immediately after her fourth (nine hour) labour, and says, 'tired'. 'It does you good to be reminded what a real labour is like' says the male consultant briskly.

An eminent gynaecologist hits the headlines by saying that 'promiscuous young girls' are more likely to get cervical cancer. He fails to add that it takes co-operation to create promiscuity and that if infection is responsible, poor male hygiene might enter into the picture somewhere.

Indicative of the medical profession's general approach is its attitude to contraception. The provision of the pill or the sheath for family planning services is still regarded as a 'non-medical' matter. Most doctors therefore make a charge for pill prescriptions, and do not normally supply the sheath at all. I can sympathise with their reluctance to spend much time handing out condoms. But what can possibly be non-medical about a device which is one of the best protections against VD, infection and unwanted pregnancy.

And why is it that many more sterilisations are carried out on women than vasectomies on men? There are still so few facilities for vasectomy that men who want one are forced to wait, and there seem to be no plans to encourage more men to chose this means of contraception. Doctors clearly prefer to persuade women having abortions to be sterilised - a practice which in my view at least has absolutely nothing to recommend it.

Women, as we know, are reached from the moment they hit puberty (or even before), by a mass of propagan-da aimed to persuade them that as they are, they won't do. They must be cleaner, sweeter, clearer, more antiseptic by several times over than nature made them, is the implication, before they can be acceptable to the male in search of sexual pleasure.

But real health education in sexual hygeine is almost absent from her programme and is never touched on during the education of her brothers. Thus what is probably the second largest women's health problem - vaginal infections - continue unabated. Cancer of the penis is unknown among Jews, who are circumscised at birth, and cancer of the cervix is much less common among Jewish wives. Circumcision is currently unfashionable in this country, though it is widely practised in America and Australia. But there is at least one doctor so convinced of its preventive role that he will perform the operation on men up to 50, on request. Meanwhile, what about health education for men?

Both the pill and antibiotics have been implicated in cases of vaginal thrush, yet women are rarely warned of

this by their doctors. Coils often lead to infection unless fitted with the utmost concern for hygiene. During childbirth, it is still common to insert a catheter to draw off the urine, yet any instrument can carry infection which, once established, may be hard to treat. And women with cystitis or discharge are still sent home far too often without referral to both gynaecologist and urologist for tests which, if they had cancer, could save their lives.

The BUPA Medical Centre in London does a complete 'well-woman' screening, which includes cervical swab, breast mammography, and X-ray and instruction in self examination of the breast. They are trying to convince the Department of Health and Social Security of the need for widespread NHS facilities for routine screening of women. Despite impressive research results, they have failed so far.

Meanwhile most women whose breast cancer is diagnosed late are still subjected to the radical mastectomy they would never have needed had the disease been arrested at once. To add insult to injury, they are then unable to get the special bras they need on the NHS! Many women have unnecessary hysterectomy, which may leave them worse off than before. And a proportion of those women currently being told to 'stop worrying' by their doctors, will die of cervical cancer or kidney disease, spotted too late.

All doctors know that proper diagnostic tests, at the proper time, are vital to the practice of good medicine. What some of them don't realise is that, in order to judge the proper time, it is necessary first to listen to the patient. Yes, even if she is female, Sir, if you don't mind.

So, what exactly *do* our gynaecologists do for us? Well, we do have good ante-natal care, though cynics have been heard to mutter that this is more for the child's benefit than for ours: And, some women say, good childbirth facilities. True, we don't actually die these days, though, where there is a choice between mother and baby the mother is still not the one to be saved as *a matter of course*. But many of us suffer needless pain, anxiety and

humiliation through the attitudes of those who attend us. There is still much to be achieved here.

How long are we prepared to wait to change the kind of medical care we are getting? Angela Kilmartin, whose career was in ruins and marriage on the rocks two years ago, had waited long enough. The U & I Club is historic in that it is the first organised women's self help group to make a real impact on the medical profession. It has used the press and television to draw attention to its members plight and already doctors are beginning to sit up and take notice. Chiswick Women's Aid is doing the same job for battered wives.

The Women's Abortion and Contraception Campaign hopes to get it through the thick skulls of all too many consultants that women *want* proper abortion and contraception facilities and intend to get them. WACC is currently fighting for us against the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (Production of Unwanted Children?) and other like-minded groups, who would like the 1967 Abortion Act repealed, yes, I said, repealed.

But the really interesting aspect of this whole question is, I think, ideological-political. Medicine, as we have seen, is a hierarchy, in which the female element is either exploited or experimented upon. I am irresistably reminded of those childhood games of 'doctor', when the little boy tells the little girl to 'lie down and take your clothes off', so that he can examine her. There's no harm in these things among children — but we're all supposed to be adult now.

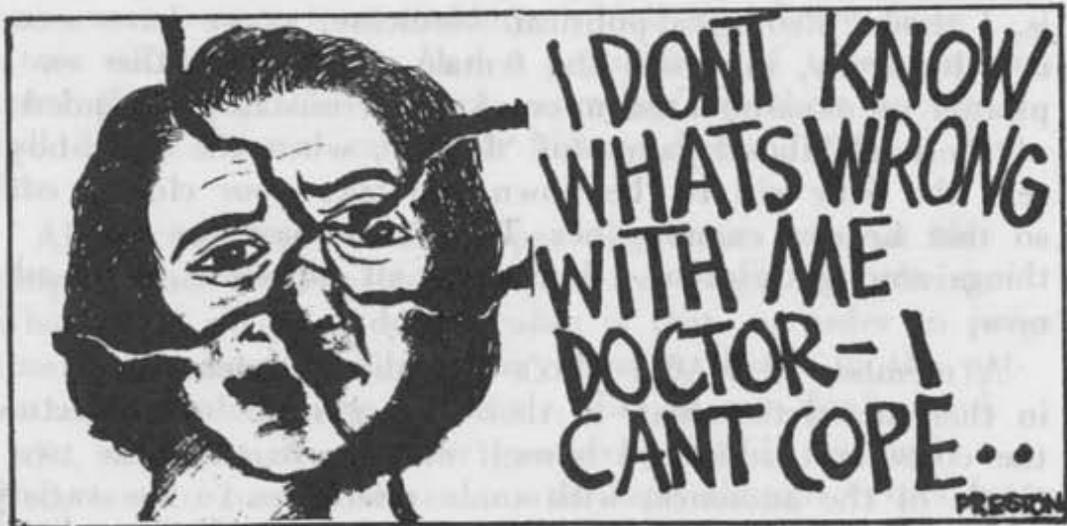
A member of WACC who's a medical student reports in their newsletter that, at their first gynaecological lecture, the consultant addressed himself entirely to the male two thirds of the audience, with snide references to the variety of sizes and shapes of breasts and instructions to 'take a good look whenever you can!' And I have it on good authority that medical students have been solemnly warned against the awkwardness of having to examine that horror of horrors, an uninhibited woman! No wonder many girls prefer a female gynaecologist, who may at least have a

chance of guessing what it feels like to be on the receiving end of this kind of thing.

American women's groups started to examine the socio-political background to these attitudes some time ago. Discovering how difficult it was to get any information out of gynaecologists about what, exactly, their discipline involved, they decided to find out for themselves. With the aid of plastic speculums, mirrors, basic textbooks, and each other, they set out on a journey which has brought far-reaching results.

Angela Briggs

This is a slightly amended version of an article which first appeared in SPARE RIB, December 1973 (19).



Notes on Ideology

The concept of ideology is central to the study of social and political thought. It refers to a set of ideas, beliefs, and values that shape a group's or individual's perception of the world and their actions. Ideology often serves as a framework for understanding social structures and power relations. It can be both a reflection of material conditions and a force that shapes them. In the context of social movements, ideology provides a common language and a sense of purpose. It is through ideology that individuals and groups can identify their interests and mobilize resources to achieve their goals. The study of ideology is thus essential for understanding the dynamics of social change and the role of ideas in human history.

Sexuality

and Ideology

Sexuality and ideology are deeply intertwined. Ideology shapes how we understand and experience our sexuality, while our sexual experiences and desires can challenge and transform our ideological beliefs. In many cultures, traditional ideologies have prescribed specific roles and behaviors for men and women, often based on binary gender concepts. These ideologies have influenced everything from marriage practices to reproductive rights. However, contemporary movements for sexual equality and diversity have challenged these traditional norms. They argue that sexuality is a spectrum, not a binary, and that individuals should have the freedom to express their sexuality without being constrained by rigid ideological frameworks. This challenge is not only a personal one but also a political one, as it involves questioning the power structures that uphold traditional gender roles. The intersection of sexuality and ideology is a complex and evolving field of study, reflecting the ongoing struggle for social justice and the recognition of diverse human experiences.

Notes on Ideology

The original reason for writing these notes lay in the discussion we had in the RED RAG collective about some parts of Beatrix Campbell's article *Sexuality and Submission*, notably the part where she writes about women 'colluding' in their own oppression. (*The version of 'Sexuality and Submission' appearing in this book has been revised in the light of these discussions - Eds.*) The use of this phrase seems to indicate that we understand history, oppression, and the struggle between classes and social groups in a very limited and mechanical way. So that we're able to talk in a surprised way about people colluding in their oppression - actively helping that oppression to continue as if we always thought that oppression was a matter of the oppressed being blindly tossed about like objects. We have reduced our understanding of human reality and human oppression to a narrow materialist one. By this I mean that we recognise that people have material needs and ways of satisfying them, defined by the relations of production of the system they live under, but what we tend to forget is that each person also has at all times a *consciousness* of that situation - a need to understand.

Just as there is a constant struggle going on between the ruling class, which has its hands on the resources, and the rest of us for our material needs, so there is a war going on in terms of *ideas*. Just as individuals have ways of seeing themselves and their situation, so do ruling groups have ways of explaining and presenting themselves. As the economic power lies in the hands of the owners of the means of production, so does the extraordinary power of defining how all the rest of us understand ourselves and the system we live under. I'll call this ideological power.

The cost of 'consensus'

As the advanced imperialist countries developed an increasingly complex commerce and technology, they developed needs for a workforce which gave them more than its unskilled physical labour (their old colonies could provide this commodity more cheaply), and began to exploit more of our mental capacities, training us to join a more sophisticated workforce with increasing consumer needs. At the same time, maintaining power by means of ideology became vitally important - if you can keep people understanding their situation in certain ways so that they accept them, go on accepting them, and pass on that acceptance to their children or to their pupils in school etc., then you have a system of exploitation which all classes consent to, vote for, and participate in. Reproducing the relations of production, to use marxist terms, is a main function of the modern capitalist state. A range of institutions currently pumps out ruling class ideologies necessary for the system to keep running smoothly with the mass of people consenting. The most crucial of those would be the family (of course, the family is *much more* than an ideological institution but it's as the place where our consciousness is first formed that I mainly want to give it importance here) and the school system, T.V. and press, with the Social Services, Nursery System, medical and psychiatric establishments supporting. Then there are other everyday institutions which also have importance in forming our ideas about the kind of lives we lead - the Church, political apparatus (the Party system, voting etc.), the legal system, the Trade Unions, culture/literature, football, bingo etc.

Consciousness raising

Late 1969/70. I'm a housewife living with man and child in an isolated family situation in a strange city. I make one trip per day to the supermarket, just for a change of scene. I try for jobs and fail because I can't get the child into a nursery. I try and write novels, I blame myself for not being 'strong' enough to make it in the world, I blame

myself for not being consumed with interest for the child and the man, I blame myself for not being sexually glowing and happy. The conflict between the various ideas of what I should be and the real trap I'm living in, makes me constantly depressed and guilty.

A woman friend took me along to a new women's liberation group, and in the space of an hour, the war that was going on inside me began to show itself as a war in which everyone was involved. Ideas I had about what I should be, ways I had of understanding myself and the world began to show themselves as aspects of *ideology* which affected everyone (or all women, in this instance) - sexist ideology, the ideology of competitive individualism, and so on. That moment of seeing myself as part of a social group with a history and shared oppression was the same moment as seeing a system with a sexist ideology. Though a partial realisation, it felt like, and of course was, a real blow against the system and a step towards freedom. The beginnings of political consciousness.

Had I been *colluding* in my oppression then, then, up to that point? I had certainly been taking part in it - but only because I had no weapons against it. Until that group appeared, I struggled alone, understanding myself and my needs in the system's terms, and perpetuating these terms and the suffering.

The need for a total view

Obviously there are limitations to the kind of collective consciousness raising and ideological struggle that were the guts of the early stages of women's liberation (and still an important part of its practice). When we discussed our own experiences we located mainly one aspect of the capitalist system's reality - its sexism. When we went out and took action against the system, we acted against its sexist ideology - we covered adverts with stickers, we sat in on male preserves where women were barred, etc. We were more or less blind to our class position in a system which was sexist. Our situations as middle class women made it

difficult for us to come to grips with the racist nature of capitalism. We could pinpoint a theory of sexism but not racism; in our early attempts to assess all these things and discover connections, we floundered and were constantly put down. We were still, unknowingly, labouring away under various capitalist ideologies because we hadn't come to grips with the total, material and ideological reality of capitalism. And of course the women's movement alone cannot do this, nor can the male dominated left, nor the labour movement do it alone, nor the militant forces of black people but only a many sided revolutionary socialist grouping or movement which preserves the autonomy of its various forces, and organises at all levels in terms of ideological struggle and the development of new social relationships - a new balance and unity of our needs through struggle, which means the needs of the oppressed being set in total opposition against the needs of the oppressors to hang on to their power and keep us divided, materially, by sex, race, age, occupation etc.

While struggling through Louis Althusser's article on *Ideology and the State* I found myself thinking how much he was still blinded by being *inside* male supremacist ideology - so that he, of all famous theoreticians, while writing away about ideology, simply couldn't see the sexist aspects of capitalism and its ideology, because of his age, history and situation as a male intellectual. I wondered if he even noticed his housekeeper or wife come in and serve his tea while he was sitting perfecting his 'world view'.

Sexism and racism

One good point he makes, though, is that ideologies, like economic and political systems, don't just fall from the sky, of course, or emerge fully fledged from institutions. They arise at different times in history out of the struggle between different social groups and classes. I'll try and elaborate on this point. For instance, imagine the beginnings of the patriarchy, when the biological division between men and women hardened into a *division of labour*, and the

control of production and ownership of resources (not just surplus produce, but women, children and slaves) settled in the hands of men. At this decisive moment, when one group appropriated social power and resources, the other group is denigrated as weak and inferior. So you have, in one move, a group with social power - *and* the ideology to justify having it. So much for the beginnings of male supremacism and private property. Similarly, with the uneven development of different civilisations and races, powerful nations took on weaker ones and made their first imperialist conquest, the ideological justification - the natural and absolute superiority of the white race - was born in the moment of victory (and elaborated and consolidated with every consequent one over the centuries, of course).

It's always the group with the economic, social and political power which has the ruling ideology - the ruled (if they want to stay alive and out of prison or whatever the repressive institutions are in any given society) have no option but to accept that particular explanation of reality. For women, say, who have to live out their women's lives, to have to live them by the idea that men are more important, men are more intelligent, men are more capable of running society etc. over centuries and to pass that on to our daughters (and sons), isn't *colluding* in our oppression, but simply the real and *total* nature of any oppression.

Men - the dream of power

I want to look now at how reactionary ideologies can flourish in groups which don't have the social power - for example, white oppressed men, men who don't own the means of production. It's necessary to see the *total* nature of their oppression, as well as the margin of privilege they gained historically at the expense of women and black people and maintain now. (Simplistically - what strength and organisation male workers have developed against the ruling class has been won at the cost of increasing sexual division of labour, and thus women's toil and re-

pression in the home, in childcare, and in the worst low paid work. And that very strength was a real push on the ruling class to find cheaper labour and higher profits elsewhere - the fruits of imperialism now, of course, benefit the whole working class materially). So much for the privilege. And the oppression? It has to be understood as total, and contradictory. There's a continual tension between the reality of boring, body grinding work for the bosses, bad food, consumer leisure, bad housing, sexual alienation - and the false ways of understanding that reality. Among these would be the ideology of equal opportunity and the freedom to compete (anyone can make it if they try), the James Bond sexual performance image, and the protective privatized bourgeois family dream. Apart from these obvious ruling class ideologies, there are other false ideas adding to this tension, new ideologies which reflect the extent to which the Trade Unions are beginning to be integrated, by way of the leadership, into the State, and become a part of the capitalist economic plan - for instance, the worker doing his bit for the national interest, the possibility 'honourable' bargains between (male) workers and bosses, workers' 'participation' in management, etc.

So you have the *fact* of individual powerlessness and deprivation in the face of a repressive system, coupled with the *dream* of individual male power and ownership (material and sexual - the Goods). This dream is worked out at the expense of women.

A mass of men living out this conflict provides the nourishment which the sexism and racism inherent in the structure of the system thrives on. (I am not at all saying that only men are racists - obviously all whites are - but just trying to get a grip on some connections between racism and sexism of ideologies). Racism or white supremacy, as the idea that whites are naturally superior, and the blacks naturally inferior, as I've said before, is the justification of the historically more powerful group for its privilege over the weaker, and as such is a constant among whites until black militancy challenges the status quo. But this ideology of superiority takes a battering when working

class white people find the 'inferior' group vying for a place in the workforce or housing list. And in the frustration and anger of the contradiction I outlined above, the white supremacism which the ruling class can exude like a gentle rain from heaven, can explode into the bitterness of National Front type racism or fascism.

As long as oppressed white men retain their small privileges in helping to suppress women and black people, without being challenged, then the dream of masculinity and power will still keep men conservative, blinkered against the realities of their oppression under capitalism, and hide from them their unity of interests with all oppressed groups and in smashing it.

At this point I should say that there are some men's groups in existence which have started a kind of ideological struggle against this dream of masculinity. How far they will go towards refusing their real privilege and pledging their interests with women, I can't, of course, say. They have at least started to examine *more* aspects of the system (its sexism) and their oppression under it - more aspects of the class struggle, than has happened before with men.

'Private life' - the family and ideology

I'm going back a bit now to look at a couple of the ideological institutions which form us and which are crucial if we are to consent to the system and believe it's the only one which can satisfy our needs. To begin with the family - it's a crucial unit for servicing, production and consumption based on a division of labour which particularly suppresses women. And in the family, where men and women under pressure of material necessity, must meet and satisfy their needs for tenderness and sexuality and have their children - the sexist structure of society is embodied in miniature. This is where men and women live out their private lives and shield each other and their children from the realities, brutalities and possibilities of public life. This is where the child, under pressure of absolute economic dependence on her/his parents, receives

its basic training, learns its needs and possibilities in terms of the system - that is, which of its needs are allowable and which of its possibilities are useful under capitalism.

In the micro-system of the family, then, the basis of the child's psycho-sexual formation is laid. The child's helplessness and complete dependence for existence on two adults is the first power structure it experiences, and in this state of vulnerability and anxiety, the child learns the power inequality between its father and mother, and the side of the fence it's destined to be on - its sex-role. As a way of understanding these realities, the child relies absolutely on the current ideologies her/his parents provide. The main ideologies which formed us as children in the West could be pinned down as competitive individualism and sexism. (Then there is the morality of 'cleanliness is next to godliness' and the work ethic. Both of these are very significant when it comes to any analysis of sexual oppression).

The restrictions the parents inflict on the child are merely preparing her/him to consent to the material and sexual restrictions of her/his role in the outside world. The restrictions will be the restrictions of a particular class, as well as a particular sex role. The ideologies the parents use to answer the child's first demands for explanations of all this condition its thought processes and help it to *police* itself. And these ideologies also vary to a degree with class. (Anyone who has gone from a working class childhood through 'classless' studenthood will remember the ferocious process of trying to throw off some aspects of ideology and adopt others more relevant to their new class position).

Everyone must have seen kids taking over this policing process in a big way and inflicting ideology on their younger brothers and sisters - 'Little girls don't do that', etc. It's a pathetic and repulsive sight (and it happens every day). Is this kids colluding in their oppression? Well, no, once again, it's a matter of them *living* their oppression and making sure others don't escape theirs

Learning the commonplaces

Sometimes, of course, the family will begin to crumble under economic or sexual stresses - the well known 'problem family' that housing departments talk of - and then its role will be bolstered by specific institutions such as Family Service Units, Marriage Guidance and so on, all with their dose of ideology. Or else the family will stay together as an economic unit, but perhaps has failed ideologically - the children haven't learnt to *police themselves*; Then a whole range of institutions come into play (!), from the gentle coercion of the Child Guidance Unit, to the Remedial School, Truant Officer, Juvenile Court, Borstal, Mental Hospital and prison. The class struggle goes on at all levels, from nudging your psyche into the correct shape, to direct repression.

For those of us whose families have trained us 'properly' so that we have a small prison in our heads (and for whom, therefore, real prisons aren't necessary), the school is the other major ideological institution we're subjected to. Here we sit and are force fed a mess of ideologies which explain and justify every aspect of capitalism - competitive individualism, private property, white supremacism, male supremacism, religion, morality, legality. And the more we're imprisoned and fragmented by these ideologies, the more easily we can sanction increasingly brutal repression in society. As the German comrades who set up Kommune 2 in 1967 wrote later :

As isolated individuals we were so restrained by fear of the landlady, the professor, the authorities, by the overwhelming power of the capitalist commonplaces that we let ourselves make accommodations with them. We knew that the mass murder in Vietnam belonged to these commonplaces.

Today, as I write, the army has set up a ring of tanks and roadblocks around Heathrow, and some dusty old ideologies are being dragged out from the wartime files of the Ministry of Defence and refurbished for 1974 - 'Military Aid in the defence of the civilian community'. Will people

soon be seeing this as an acceptable face of Western 'democracy'?

Classroom war

When we're at school, grading starts in earnest, and the ideology of competition helps us comply with it. We adjust our aspirations and capabilities to the various roles in the increasingly complex workforce that are offered to us. Teachers (not, of course, the radical ones who try to give their students the chance of developing their capacities for critical, independent thinking) and Careers Officers will have us sorted out according to sex, class background and degree of competitiveness before we know it. A trade, factory work, the army for working class boys, homecraft or typing for the working class girls, and for a lot of the rest, a promise of professionalism, a place in the new and expanding sectors of the workforce which carry out a more and more important supervisory or ideological role. The nursery nurses, Social and Community workers, primary and secondary teachers. Further Education teachers, psychiatrists, journalists, Television and film workers, Civil Service workers.



Luckily, training a mass of young people to be intellectual wage slaves and dealers in ideology, can backfire. In their prolonged apprenticeship in Universities and Colleges, they have little money and a lot of time to mull over the contradictions in their own lives and in the world generally, and a training in ideas can turn into a critical consciousness - a vital weapon against ideology. We've seen this happen massively in colleges throughout the advanced capitalist countries, and now, in the professions, more and more workers are refusing to be foiled by the bourgeois dreams held out to them, or at least are beginning to recognise that their privileges with regard to the rest of the working class are ambiguous and hardly worth preserving.

Ideology and consumer society

The ideology of individual freedom extends also to consumption. As the growth of capitalism depends more and more on everyone in the Western countries spending out on a vast range of commodities, and our needs are increasingly created by the advertising that the big capitalists bombard us with, this changing economic reality of capitalism is reflected in how we see ourselves today. As our material needs are artificially increased ('Simply *must* have that Biba's lurex jacket as well as the tweed one', 'Simply *must* fuck with that beautiful girl/guy as well as the old lady/old man'), so the ideology of *freedom to chose* from a wide range of commodities gets stronger and stronger. Of course we think we're free to buy or not buy - most people really believe that they're immune to advertising - but the reality is that we are not free *not to want* these commodities. The ideology of sexual freedom can be seen in this context as the way we understand our increasing needs to consume more, and better sexual objects.

Try on your love like a new dress

The fit and the cut, your friends to impress

Try on your smile, square on your face

Showing affection should be no disgrace. (Roxy Music)

Since sex (particularly women's sexuality) has been used tirelessly to sell all commodities to all of us (men *and* women), women have become more and more objectified, more and more confused about their sexuality. Are we to offer ourselves up passively to every man as objects to be consumed and compete with each other to be the most delectable object? Are we sexual consumers as Cosmopolitan would have us be, or are we to pledge ourselves to one man and his children in marriage and motherhood? Having to grapple constantly with the force of these conflicting ideas of ourselves was certainly one impetus behind the realisations of the first women's liberation groups. And consider the pressures that maintaining the family now means to its members when men, forced by the economic structure to support dependent wives and children, forced by one set of ideologies to understand themselves in terms of 'good husband', 'protector and provider', are also stimulated constantly by the promise of sexual consumption, and the tantalising ideology of sexual freedom. We should examine how different classes try to reconcile these contradictory needs and warring ideologies - for instance, wife-swapping, as an upper working class or petty bourgeois practice, or the showing of home 'blue' movies among young working class couples. These are different ways in which, in my experience, people may be trying to do this. But obviously it needs more people's assessment to get a clear picture.

Our freedom to buy is all very well when capitalism is booming, but at a time like the present economic crisis, when the State has to move in with hob nailed boots to hold wages (our buying power) down so that the profits 'necessary for investment' can be kept up, and when simultaneously the price of all commodities soars, then we're faced with the State forcibly controlling the needs and desires that capitalism has developed in everyone over the last decade, and contradicting the ideologies that everyone has lived by, and that a whole generation has grown up with. The mass of people are increasingly able to see that the ideology of individual freedom, competition and plenty is a fraud - and that, in reality, they are manipulated acc-

ording to the profit needs of the capitalists' or the economic strictures of the State. Especially for the generation which has no memory of the war, the ideology of 'tighten your belts in the National Interest' has worn dangerously thin this time.

Postscript

I hope that this article, however undisciplined and breathless, will be useful in stimulating more thoughts and discussions about the totality of the system we live under which is, after all, no less than Capitalism, Imperialism, the Patriarchy. And about the depth and diversity of the contradictions people suffer living out their daily lives, about the many different ways people can begin to understand the dimensions of their oppression and mount a many sided passionate and rational opposition to it.

Alison Fell

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Cultural Influences on Female Sexuality

In the current debate about women's role in society, there are two opposing views. According to the first, men and women are fundamentally different; according to the second, men and women are fundamentally the same. Few people, however, would argue, that in terms of their sexuality, men and women are really equivalent.

The belief that 'natural' differences exist is a very common one. How are male and female sexuality thought to differ? In the first place, men are considered sexually aggressive, women sexually passive. Males initiate sexual contact, asking females to go to bed with them or marry them. Only males can, legally speaking, be capable of rape. Neither legally nor psychologically can women be capable of raping men, and this psychological passivity extends into the whole structure of their sexual relationships.

If men are thought to be sexually aggressive, women are considered sexually receptive. The vagina is simply there, waiting for the penis. Women are simply there, dependent, passive and submissive, waiting for men. In sexual intercourse itself, female sexuality means slow arousal and infrequent orgasmic satisfaction. Men, on the other hand, are easily and quickly aroused, and orgasm for them is a virtually automatic event.

Much of the assumed difference between their sexual attitudes and behaviour can be summed up by saying that men are thought to have a much stronger sex drive. Sex is something they find difficult to resist - so they begin masturbation earlier and practice it more, commit adultery more, indulge in a greater variety of sexual practices (including those society defines as perversions), as well as being

more demanding and aggressive in normal marital relationships.

To a considerable extent, these differences in sexuality represent stereotypes of behaviour which we consciously or unconsciously follow. Such stereotypes have an influence because they define the 'proper' way for people to behave, and what is 'proper' and 'normal' in a society is often thought to be 'natural' as well. But are these apparent differences in the sexuality of men and women in fact natural at all?

On a biological level men and women are much more alike than different. The genitals of both sexes emerge from the same structure in the foetus - a structure which is basically female. The penis and the clitoris both develop from a sexually undifferentiated 'genital tubercle'; the scrotum and the labia develop from the skin around the urogenital opening in the foetus; the ovaries and the testicles develop from the same rudimentary material which is sexually undifferentiated at first. The factor which determines whether genital development will be male or female is the chromosomal sex of the baby, which is fixed at the moment of conception. After about seven weeks of prenatal life, the male chromosomal make-up, XY, causes hormone production in the male foetus, and its urinary and genital system develop in the characteristically male way.

These elementary facts are very important in understanding just *how* male and female resemble each other. Far from being an inferior version of the penis (a 'stunted' penis, said Freud), the clitoris is an exact replica of it. Both penis and clitoris have a shaft and a glans (head), which is particularly sensitive to sexual stimulation, and the the same set of muscles capable of responding to sexual excitement in the same way. The penis has two roots known as 'crura', which become engorged with blood and contribute to the expanded size of the penis during sexual excitement, and the clitoris has these two roots, the same size in the female as they are in the male. The network of veins and nerves with which the clitoris is connected is at least as large and probably larger than the

corresponding network in the male, so that the physiological capacity of the female to respond sexually is at least as great as the male's.

For these reasons, the discrepancy in size between penis and clitoris is hardly an explanation of the difference in the sexual response of male and female. Hormonal factors do not offer much of an explanation either. Both sexes produce male and female hormones. It is the male hormone which is associated with the sex drive, but women produce around two thirds as much of this as men. In any case, many studies have shown that psychological factors are much more important than the role of the hormone in determining sexual attitudes and behaviour.

When we look at the physiology of sexual response, there is again nothing which provides a basis to the belief in the 'natural' difference between the sexuality of male and female. As William Masters and Virginia Johnson have shown in their exhaustive study of *Human Sexual Response*, the body responses of male and female, *when sexually excited*, are virtually identical. Sexual tension in both men and women develops in four phases, which Masters and Johnson call the excitement phase, the plateau phase, the orgasmic phase and the resolution phase. Table I shows the general body reactions of male and female in all four phases.

The first specifically genital response to sexual excitement is erection in the male - taking between three and eight seconds - and vaginal lubrication in the female, which becomes established in between five and fifteen seconds. In the second, plateau, phase, there is extensive vasocongestion (filling of the blood vessels) in the pelvic organs and throughout the body in both sexes. At this stage, neither male nor female is able to respond effectively to minor non-sexual stimuli. In the orgasmic phase, orgasm is marked by about eight to ten contractions per second in the relevant organs of male and female, though the female's may go on for longer. In the final phase, signs of sex tension disappear - slowly if the ascent to orgasm was gradual, quickly if the ascent was rapid. This process is again

HOW WOMEN AND MEN RESPOND TO SEXUAL AROUSAL

WOMEN

MEN

Excitement phase

nipple erection
sexual flush (25%)

nipple erection (30%)

Plateau phase

sexual flush (75%)
carpopedal spasm
general muscle tension
rapid breathing
heart rate 100 - 160
beats a minute

sexual flush (25%)
carpopedal spasm
general muscle tension
rapid breathing
heart rate 100 - 160
beats a minute

Orgasmic phase

specific muscle
contractions
rapid breathing
heart rate 110 - 180
beats a minute

specific muscle
contractions
rapid breathing
heart rate 100 - 180
beats a minute

Resolution phase

sweating (30-40%)
rapid breathing
heart rate 150 - 180
beats a minute

sweating (30-40%)
rapid breathing
heart rate 150 - 180
beats a minute

identical in both male and female.

Masters and Johnson emphasise that the development of sexual tension in male and female follows the same course irrespective of whether the cause of stimulation is intercourse, masturbation or fantasy. They also show definitively that women only have *one* sort of orgasm - not two as Freud and others were convinced they did. *Female orgasm is essentially clitoral*. Another interesting finding is that sexual excitement which does not resolve in orgasm is physiologically just as frustrating for the female as for the male. One female studied by Masters and Johnson was exposed to multiple sequences of intercourse for six and a half hours without orgasm. During this time her pelvic organs were grossly enlarged and congested; she could not sleep and complained of pressure, cramp, pain and back-ache. At the end of six hours, she masturbated to orgasm. Pelvic vasocongestion disappeared completely within ten minutes.

In the light of these facts, how can the belief in differences between male and female sexuality be explained? There *are*, of course, clear and well documented disparities between the sexual responses of male and female *in our society*. Perhaps the most prominent of these is the difficulty women have in reaching orgasm during sexual intercourse. Estimates of total inability to reach orgasm in intercourse vary from 10% to nearly 30% of married women. Of 339 women treated by Masters and Johnson for sexual dysfunction, 88% suffered from the inability to reach orgasm in intercourse.

Why does this difficulty exist on such a scale? Two answers suggest themselves. Firstly, the relative infrequency of orgasm in women could be accounted for by the behaviour of their male partners in intercourse. Secondly, cultural factors could account for the 'blocking' of the orgasmic response in women.

In practice, both answers seem likely. Not only do we now know (thanks to Masters and Johnson) that the physiology and anatomy of sexual response is more or less identical in male and female, but we also know that mastur-

bation is a much surer and speedier route to orgasm in the female than is intercourse. Kinsey asked 2,114 females how long they took to achieve orgasm in masturbation. About half took between one and three minutes, a quarter took four to five minutes and only 12% took more than ten minutes (some of these deliberately prolonged the time taken). The average man, like the average woman, can reach orgasm by masturbation in between one and three minutes. But whereas three quarters of males ejaculate within ten minutes of beginning intercourse, the time women take to reach orgasm in intercourse is usually considerably longer. Complete failure to achieve orgasm is also far more common for women in intercourse than it is in masturbation.

Clearly, therefore, orgasm difficulty experienced by women in intercourse has something to do with the sexual techniques used. The most common position used in intercourse - man on top of woman (and Kinsey estimated that 70% of American couples never used any other) - does not allow direct stimulation of the clitoris by the penis, although secondary stimulation does occur. Only the female superior (woman on top) and lateral (side by side) positions permit primary stimulation of the clitoris, with the female superior position being by far the best from this point of view.

No doubt in partial compensation for the inadequacies of the man on top position, marriage manuals advocate direct stimulation of the clitoris by the male before intercourse begins.

It seems, therefore, that some of the difficulty found by women in achieving orgasm during intercourse may be due to this conspiracy of ignorance against her. Sometimes the ignorance is complete, and men simply do not know enough about the female anatomy to locate or understand the function of the clitoris. Sadly, such ignorance may even extend to women themselves. To understand why this occurs, we have to go back to the beginning, and look at the way female sexuality is defined in our culture. As Simone de Beauvoir opens her account of women's sit-

uation in *The Second Sex*: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'.

Little girls are taught to sit with their legs together, little boys are allowed to sit with their legs apart. There is something inevitable about the small boy's manipulation of his penis, but something instantly reprehensible about the little girls exploitation of her clitoral/vaginal area as a source of pleasure. In adolescence, the sexual exploits of the male are ignored rather than forbidden by parents whereas those of the female are seen, and prohibited, as sinful promiscuity. A female who is a virgin on her wedding night is admired, but a male who retains his virginity is mocked. A man proves his masculinity by going to bed with women, a woman proves her femininity by *not* going to bed with men. Masculinity equals sexuality, whereas femininity is opposed to it. A man's sexual appetite is the core of his masculine role, but an adult woman with an appetite for sex is a 'bad' (unfeminine) woman.

Masters and Johnson describe one man whose inability to ejaculate in his wife's vagina was due to his disapproval of her multiple orgasms. He thought her one previous sexual experience had left a scar on her character, and perceiving her as 'bad', he was unable to let himself go inside her.

If men think of active sexuality in women as evil, then so do many women. A study by Eustace Chesser of sexual, marital and family relationships in a sample of 6,251 women found that over half the women had received the impression from their mothers that sex was something unpleasant, which women had to put up with. Those who got the opposite impression were much more likely to experience orgasm, and find sex generally satisfying (and also to have happier marriages).

Under these cultural conditions it is very difficult indeed for a woman to become aware of the fact that she possesses a sexual organ - the clitoris - and a physiological capacity for sexual excitement and orgasm which is equivalent to the male's. It is difficult for her to know her own body, and to have confidence in telling her lover

what she would like him to do to it. Sexual response to orgasm is the physiological capacity of most, if not all, women, but its achievement in our culture is conditional on the acceptance by women of their own sexuality.

Another factor which handicaps female sexuality is the kind of personality which our culture considers appropriate in females. Emotional instability and sensitivity, conformity, and lack of self confidence are all personality traits which are thought peculiarly feminine, and are possessed by many women. All these traits are also associated with a low capacity for orgasms, presumably because they make self-assertion in the sexual act much less likely. Endorsing this association between personality and sexuality is the fact that the same relationship exists for men. Men with these personality traits tend to suffer from, or fear, impotence.

The ability to respond sexually is partly a function of experience for men as well as women. Cultural repression of female sexuality acts to delay the onset of sexual experience for women, thus providing another barrier to sexual equality. Premarital intercourse is rarer in girls than in boys - so is masturbation. During adolescence, masturbation in boys is practically universal, but, according to Kinsey, only 28% of 15 year old girls masturbated. However 40% of females aged up to 20 and 62% of those aged up to 40 had masturbated in Kinsey's survey. These figures demonstrate the increase in sexual activity which occurs with experience. For women, masturbation increases with marriage, with the rising age of the husband, and, notably, with divorce or widowhood.

The fact that women's sexual activity increases markedly with marriage is thus a reflection of its repression and inhibition before marriage.

During adolescence and early adulthood, marriage has a 'displacement' function in the development of female sexuality. While young men are concerned to achieve sexual success with girls, the young girl dreams of marriage, two children, a house, and all the trappings of domesticity. It is primarily with these goal in mind that she is allowed to show an interest in men and in sex.

This is one basic difference between masculine and feminine roles in our culture. While men have careers, women get married. More women are employed outside the home these days, but very few are employed continuously without a break for having and bringing up children. For women, the housewife, wife and mother role remains the most important one. Thus, differences in male and female sexuality in our society are associated with differences between their roles *generally*. Other cultures neither define the social and economic roles of the sexes in the same differentiated way as we do, nor do they necessarily perceive male and female sexuality as opposed and different.

For example, in one south-west Pacific society, it is men, not women, who are considered to need protection against the possibility of sexual attack. Cultivation of physical beauty is a male concern - only men wear flowers in their hair and scented leaves tucked in their belts to make them attractive. When fully adorned, young men are thought so irresistible to women that they run the risk of being seduced if allowed out on their own.

In their society, sex is an ordinary topic of daily conversation. Sexual intercourse is assumed to be intensely pleasurable, and deprivation harmful, for both men and women. When first married, husband and wife are reported to have intercourse twice daily. This consists of an extended period of foreplay, during which both partners stimulate each other's genitals, and a short period of copulation lasting 15 to 30 seconds which culminates in simultaneous orgasm for husband and wife. It is believed that once stimulated during foreplay, neither male or female can fail to achieve orgasm - women unable to have orgasm are unheard of. Either partner can terminate the marriage if sexual intercourse is infrequent - infrequency meaning about once every ten days. Between puberty and marriage both males and females are urged to masturbate to relieve sexual tensions, which are thought to be just as much of a problem for women as for men.

Clearly this is one culture which allows the female to discover and exploit her sexual capacity to the full. Mali-

nowski, in his famous study of the Trobriand Islanders, reported a similar equality between the sexual attitudes and behaviour of male and female. Trobriand culture allows sexual behaviour throughout childhood and adolescence, so that children of four and five imitate intercourse, and girls at six or eight are having intercourse with penetration. Trobriand positions for intercourse omit the usual man-on-top-of-woman position used by Europeans - which they dislike because it restricts the activity of the woman in intercourse. (Not surprisingly, they consider that European men are inept lovers because they use this position, and ejaculate too quickly.)

The most usual position for Trobrianders is for the man to squat in front of the woman, pulling her towards him and, and, when orgasm is approaching, raising her body towards his. The expression used for orgasm means 'the seminal fluid discharge' and is used of either sex indiscriminately. (It also covers nocturnal emissions and female glandular secretions.) Masturbation is regarded as the practice of an idiot - in other words, someone who is incapable of having heterosexual intercourse.

Overall, Trobriander women appeared to Malinowski to be much more assertive and sexually aggressive than women in his own culture, and frequently took the initiative in sexual relationships. It is perhaps no accident that a society where there is a great deal of *practical* equality between men and women also recognises the disadvantages of the male superior position for intercourse. By contrast, our own society is still a patriarchal one, and where male dominance outside the bedroom is the rule, male dominance within it is more easily expressed in the male superior position.

Comparing sexuality generally in the two cultures, Malinowski believed that the Trobriander threshold of arousal was much higher than ours, with much more sexual stimulation needed to produce orgasm. The necessity for prolonged foreplay is commonly stressed as an exclusively

feminine sexual need in our culture. In the Trobriander case, its importance to both men and women appears to derive from their identical conditioning in sexual behaviour throughout pre-adult life.

Many other cultures, like the Trobriander, recognise the right and ability of women to reach orgasm in intercourse, and the difficulty of achieving it in certain positions. Crow Indian women expect orgasm every time and are reported to obtain it usually by sitting on top of the man - if the man is on top of the woman they say he will ejaculate too soon. On many of the Caroline Islands, women are expected to have orgasm regularly in intercourse. If the man reaches a climax before his partner, she laughs at him and asks him to try again, and here also the best position is thought to be the female superior one.

Anthropology is full of examples of cultures which define sexuality differently. These examples show human sexuality to be culturally variable in the form it takes, rather than being fixed by nature or biology. So, although it can be said that female sexuality is culturally influenced in our own society, male sexuality undoubtedly is too. There are societies, like the Arapesh of New Guinea, which play down the aggressive and demanding element in sexuality for the male as well as for the female. The Arapesh develop tenderness and parental feelings in both male and female, devaluing the function of sex as a means of individual satisfaction. Neither men nor women are considered to have spontaneous sexual urges - sex exists for procreation, and childrearing is the main work for adults of both sexes. Men do not regard women as sexual objects, and parents do not fear that adolescents left to their own devices will indulge in intercourse.

The sexual role of the Arapesh male would seem very strange indeed to the male in industrial society. One of the most psychologically crippling disabilities from which

the contemporary man can suffer is impotence - the inability to get or sustain an erection. The measure of his sexual success, of his success as a man, is the quality of his erection. The corresponding disability for the modern woman is her inability to achieve orgasm. Whilst 50 years ago it was thought improper for women to have orgasms or be sexually responsive in any way, now there is something wrong with a woman who is persistently non-orgasmic. Both these dysfunctions - impotence in the male and lack of orgasm in the female - are probably predictable reactions to the 'double bind' situation in which individuals today are placed. E.g., on the one hand, society expects them to make a sexual success of their lives but, on the other, sex is treated as something inestimably private and very little education or advice is offered to young people embarking on sexual relationships. The knowledge of how to make love is *not* instinctual - otherwise cases of infertility due to ignorance of the need for penetration in intercourse would not still occur.

Yet the female who cannot achieve orgasm suffers from a far more severe and deep-rooted form of sexual dysfunction than any that befalls the male. Masters and Johnson in their study of *Human Sexual Inadequacy* point to 'sociocultural deprivation' as the basic cause of this disability. Cultural influence, they say, makes women adapt, sublimate, inhibit and distort their natural capacity to function sexually, in the interests of fulfilling their culturally assigned passive, dependent (and inherently non-sexual) feminine role. *The experience of orgasm is resisted because women are still led to reject their sexual identity.* The treatment Masters and Johnson recommend for lack of orgasm hinges on the theme of telling women that the penis is theirs to play with, just as men have for centuries believed the vagina exists for them to use as they wish.

Masters and Johnson suggest, by way of explanation, that the repression of female sexuality is culturally induced (in a male-oriented society) to neutralise the physiological superiority that females undoubtedly possess in this respect. It is the female, not the male, who possesses an organ - the clitoris - whose sole function is sexual pleasure. In addition, multiple orgasms i.e. many successive orgasms in a short space of time, is a physiological capacity which only females have. Both these capacities quite possibly represent threats to the male, conditioned as he is by the need to feel dominant and superior. They also represent threats to the female herself, conditioned as *she* is by the culturally induced need to deny her sexuality.

Ann Oakley

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The Suppressed Power of Female Sexuality

Sexuality, according to Reich, is life energy. It is, he says, *sexual energy which governs the structure of human feeling and thinking*. And it is for this reason that sexuality must be ruthlessly repressed if people's minds and feelings are to succumb without resistance to an authoritarian social order: If this is true of people in general, it is doubly true of women. It has been crucial, in creating the docile and submissive females required by our male society, to suppress and deny the existence of women's powerful sexuality. This has been achieved in a number of ways, from the propagation of myths purporting women's relative asexuality, to the denial of our right to control our own bodies. The reason for this is political. Its aim is to keep us 'in our place', to ensure our subservience, to render impossible our rebellion. But women are rebelling, and are reclaiming the control and ownership of their own bodies. To achieve fully this aim we must not only regain control of our fertility, we must also regain the right to our own sexuality, to use and express as *we see fit*. For too long women's 'life energy' has been suppressed or allowed only in the service of others. It is time we reclaimed it.

The colonization of women's sexuality

For centuries women have been made the sexual property of men. Our bodies have been taken from us and their ownership given either to an individual man or collectively to the political class of men. Barbara Burris writes:

Women, set apart by physical differences between them and men, were the first colonized group Our bodies were first turned into the property of the males. Men considered female bodies as territory over which they fought for absolute control.

Our bodies are our territory, our sexuality and fertility, our raw materials. In our male imperialist culture both are systematically exploited.

One of the effects of this colonization has been to cut women off from the inner core of their own sexuality. Women have a natural capacity for sexuality far in excess of that of men (see later). But thousands of years of patriarchal conditioning and exploitation has robbed us of our sexual potential and deceived us about the true nature of our sexuality. Women are forbidden to own and use their sexuality for *themselves*, as a means of personal self-expression. Our authentic sexuality has been taken from us, subjected to a process of distortion and mutilation, and then returned to us as a passive submissiveness which is held up as 'true' female sexuality.

In making the woman an object of sexual pleasure for men, patriarchal society defines her as a sexual object for herself. And like all colonized people she incorporates the definitions of the dominant culture. Her own experience and pleasure in sexuality therefore will be derived primarily from the effect she has on others rather than concern with her own subjective desires and experiences. It is through *experiencing* ourselves primarily as objects in the lives of others that we have lost touch with our own subjective sexuality

The distortion of female sexuality is achieved through defining it exclusively in terms of its complementarity to men's, and never in its own right. Male sexuality is defined as the 'given' and female sexuality is then defined in relation to it. Anything which does not correspond with this is then dismissed as either perverted or sick. Because men have defined themselves as sexually active, dominant, and sadistic, they have in turn defined women as sexually

passive, submissive and masochistic. At no time have women been allowed to define their own sexuality. Anna Koedt has referred to this as the myth of the invisible woman.

One of the elements of male chauvinism is the refusal or inability to see women as total, separate human beings. Rather, men have chosen to define women only in terms of how they benefitted men's lives. Sexually, a woman was not seen as an individual wanting to share equally in the sexual act, any more than she was seen as a person with independent desires when she did anything else in society. Thus, it was easy to make up what was convenient about women; for on top of that, society has been a function of male interests, and women were not organised to form even a vocal opposition to the male experts.

And so women's intrinsic sexuality is suppressed and replaced instead with a counterfeit male ideal of what he would like her to be. This stereotype of the compliant, passive female is so ingrained in our male culture, that in spite of considerable evidence to the contrary, it continues to be accepted, by and large, by both sexes.

Women's sexual potential

In 1966, Masters and Johnson published the findings of their eleven year study on human sexual physiology. Their findings have been particularly significant for women and have exploded many myths, in particular the myth of the vaginal orgasm. However what is particularly relevant to this paper is their discovery of the vastly superior sexual capacity of women to that of men. After studying 7,500 female sexual responses they concluded that multiple orgasm was the biological norm for most average females, and that their capacity to go on having orgasms was only terminated by physical exhaustion.

The average female with optimal arousal will usually be satisfied with 3-5 manually induced orgasms; whereas mechanical stimulation, as with the electric vibrator, is less tiring and induces her to go on to long stimulative sessions

of an hour or more during which she may have 20 to 50 consecutive orgasms. She will only stop when totally exhausted.

(Masters and Johnson)

It was also found that, in general, 'a woman's orgasm lasts about twice as long as a man's' in terms of effective contractions. Although the overall duration may be the same in men there are three to four very strong contractions followed by less intense ones. In women there are eight to fifteen contractions of which the first five to six or more are the most intense. In an analysis of the Masters and Johnson findings, Mary Sherfey comments upon women she has encountered in clinical practice who, through the use of an electric vibrator have also achieved up to fifty orgasms in a single session. She says that she had considered them 'cases of nymphomania without promiscuity', and that although that label may be correct from the standpoint of our cultural norm, '...from the standpoint of normal physiological functioning, these women exhibit a healthy, uninhibited sexuality - and the number of orgasms attained are a measure of the human female's orgasmic potentiality.' She comes to the conclusion that most women are completely unaware of their own orgasmic capacity.

'A woman,' quotes Masters 'will usually be satisfied with 3-5 orgasms...'. I believe it would rarely be said, 'A man will usually be satisfied with three to five ejaculations.' the man is satisfied. The woman usually wills herself to be satisfied because she is simply unaware of the extent of her orgasmic capacity. However, I predict that this hypothesis will come as no great shock to many women who consciously realise, or intuitively sense, their lack of satiation.

(Sherfey)

Much of the mystification surrounding female sexuality has come from our male culture's virtual denial of the existence of the clitoris, or at best dismissing it as unimportant or immature. But in actual fact, all female orgasms are located in the clitoris, and it is no accident that male society did not wish this independent organ of female sex-

ual pleasure to be recognised or acknowledged. In fact the sole function of the clitoris is that of sexual pleasure. The penis on the other hand, has the dual function of urination and the transmission of semen. The clitoris is the *only* human organ solely designed for sexual pleasure and as Mary Sherfey comments 'our myth of the female's relative asexuality is a biological absurdity.'

The suppression of female sexuality

With such a tremendous sexual drive and capacity, it is extraordinary that our male culture has been able so to distort the true nature of female sexuality, that the woman herself has been largely unaware of this fundamental biological capacity within her. It is interesting therefore to consider some of the ways in which this has been achieved. Firstly, one of the most common physical components which stands in the way of full female sexual satisfaction is the male's inability to delay his ejaculation long enough for the woman to attain even one orgasm during intercourse. Premature ejaculation is the most common sexual dysfunction in men and is considered to affect millions of men and their wives. (Belliveau & Richter). The extent of this problem can be seen in the fact that 'according to Kinsey three-quarters of the average male population reach orgasm within two minutes.' Unlike females, who have an unlimited capacity for sexual activity which ceases only when physical exhaustion intervenes, men have a strictly limited sexual capacity, and having once ejaculated, are rarely able to achieve another erection without at least some interval of time. In view of this, the woman in such circumstances never has an opportunity to get in touch with her greater sexual capacity, because the whole exchange is over before she has had a chance to begin.

Fifteen to twenty per cent of all [American] women have never had an orgasm. About fifty per cent can reach an orgasm on a 'now and then' basis, meaning that they experience full culmination about one sex act out of three. Thirty to thirty five per cent of American wives say that

they 'usually' reach orgasms, meaning that they get there two out of three times or thereabouts. Only a very few women can claim that they have an orgasm every time they take part in sexual activities (Woodward).

If a woman has never experienced sexual excitement or climax, she can come to believe that it is she who is lacking in sexuality and will see herself as asexual. This view is generally confirmed by men who ejaculate prematurely, as they often tend to see the fault as their wives' lack of sexuality and never consider that the problem is their own sexual incompetence. These men also put a low evaluation on female satisfaction and see sexuality mainly as a male prerogative, with their wives fulfilling the role of 'sexual receptacles who are not supposed to have or to express sexual feelings of their own'. (Belliveau & Richter). Many women, whose husbands were successfully treated for premature ejaculation, found that they attained orgasm for the first time in their lives. It is also worth mentioning that male problems of premature ejaculation are greatly increased by the male superior coital position (i.e. the man on top). It is probably no coincidence that men who hold a derogatory attitude to women prefer to maintain the male superior position, and thereby further decrease the woman's chances of attaining full sexual satisfaction.

Secondly, the male culture itself forbids the woman to 'accept herself honourably as a sexual being'. It decrees that the female requires special permission for the expression of her sexuality. She is conditioned in her formative years to dissemble 'much of her developing functional sexuality in response to societal requirements for a 'good girl' facade'. She is allowed to retain only the 'symbolic romanticism which usually accompanies these sexual feelings'. It is only in specifically prescribed conditions that her inherent sexuality is allowed to emerge, namely when it is accompanied by strong personal commitment, and is directed solely towards one man. 'These studies which demonstrated the sexual capacity of women, added to Masters and Johnsons contact with women in treatment of sexual problems have shown them clearly the role of our

culture in inhibiting female sexuality'. (Belliveau & Richter).

Thirdly, the male culture not only distorts female sexuality to the point of absurdity, it then draws up a moral code based upon that distortion. This has come to be known as the double standard, that is, a moral code 'which has offered a set of permissive attitudes for men and another set of restrictive ones for women.' The double standard was particularly blatant in the Victorian era, but Geoffrey Gorer, writing in 1971, in his study of *Sex and Marriage in England Today*, comments that it still has fairly wide currency. The extent to which women have incorporated these distortions can be seen when he concludes that 'it is predominantly women who maintain this double standard'.

Lastly, if female sexuality should survive the problems of premature ejaculation, the lack of societal permission for its expression, and the unjust condemnation of the double standard, it is then considered indecent. In the last century 'if a woman showed an active interest in sex, it was thought she had become depraved'. (Rover) Even as late as 1955 when Gorer undertook his study *Exploring English Character*, he was not allowed to ask concrete questions about female orgasm because 'the editors thought that it might cause unnecessary offence, and would anyhow be too embarrassing for the young women coding the questionnaires!' The assumption being, presumably, that female sexuality is offensive.

If in spite of all this a woman refuses to accept her subservient sexual role, external enforcement is resorted to, including the threat of physical sexual violence.

...it is interesting to see the continued recurrence, in conversation about a snobbish or aloof woman, of the phrase, 'She ought to be raped', as if this were the ultimate humiliation that would bring her to her (psychological) knees and thus allow the man to feel superior. (Maslow)

But probably the most effective form of external control of female sexuality is our male society's refusal to allow women control of their own fertility. The fear of pregnancy has always been used to deter women from engaging in sexual activity not sanctioned by society. At the same time pregnancy has also been used as an excellent way of keeping woman 'in her place'. As Nietzsche so aptly put it, woman is 'a problem solved by pregnancy'. (*Sullerot*) And the capacity to fertilize therefore is one of the most prized possessions in the male's armoury of coercive weapons against the female. It serves to reassure him of his power over her.

Studies in the US of lower class (male) adolescents show a clear relationship between an assessment of their own masculine potency and getting a girl pregnant. The boys say quite openly that they 'like to ride bare-back and get a girl pregnant'. (Ciba)

If they are prevented from doing this by the girls' use of contraceptives, they find the situation almost intolerable. Dr. Derek Miller of the University of Michigan Medical Centre claims that 'late adolescent males may find it almost intolerable to feel their fertility is absolutely controlled by women. Many such men report intercourse as being more enjoyable when their partner discontinues the contraceptive pill. Others are furious when a girl goes on or off the pill *without permission.*' (my emphasis). (*Guardian*). For the woman who lived before the advent of the pill, there was no protection from the ribaldry of the males over her wretched subjection. Laurence Housman wrote of a scene he witnessed 'on the borders of one of our great London Parks'.

A poor working woman, about to become a mother, was on her way home when unexpectedly her pains overtook her, and she could go no further. A policeman came to her aid, and went to find a conveyance; and while she waited a crowd gathered, men and boys; and as they watched her they laughed and made jokes. She was a symbol to them of what sex meant; some man had given her her lesson, and now she was learning it; and to their minds

it was a highly satisfactory spectacle. (*my emphasis*) (Rover). She was a symbol to them of what sex meant; male dominance-female subjection. It meant sexual intercourse as an exercise in power; male power-female powerlessness. But we now know that women are not powerless and that their sexual capacity is far greater than men's. It is time for a redefinition of sexuality.

Social control

In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, the myths about female sexuality continue to flourish. Susan Lydon in her article *The Politics of Orgasm* says,

To anyone acquainted with the body of existing knowledge of feminine sexuality, the Masters and Johnson findings were truly revolutionary and liberating in the extent to which they demolished the established myths. Yet four years after the study was published, it seems hardly to have made much of an impact at all. Certainly it is not for lack of information that the myths persist; Human Sexual Response, despite its weighty scientific language, was an immediate best-seller, and popular paperbacks explicated it to millions of people in simpler language and at a cheaper price. The mythology remains intact because a male dominated culture has a vested interest in its continuance.

Mary Sherfey argues that it took 5,000 years or longer for the subjection of women to take place. 'All relevant data from the 12,000 to 8,000 B C period indicate that pre-civilized woman enjoyed full sexual freedom and was often totally incapable of controlling her sexual drive'. In order to establish a patriarchal social system based on property ownership and inheritance women's sexuality had to be crushed. 'With the rise of settled agriculture economies, man's territorialism became expressed in property rights and kinship laws. Large families of known parentage were mandatory and could not evolve until the inordinate

sexual demands of women were curbed' (*Sherfey*). And this suppression has continued ever since, reaching perhaps its highest point during the last century, when women were viewed merely as child bearing machines, and all sexual drive was claimed to be male.

By robbing women of their sexuality, male society has created a certain kind of 'female' personality. Cut off from our strong sexual energy we are also cut off from, as Reich puts it, our 'life energy'. We become submissive, compliant, unsure of ourselves. We lack confidence and we rely on men to make the rules and tell us what we have to do. Without our sexuality, our self esteem is low. Maslow has found that sexual behaviour and attitudes are much more closely related to feelings of high self esteem than to 'sheer sexual drive'. It seems that a vicious circle is set up - robbing us of our sexuality diminishes our self esteem, and low self esteem diminishes our sexual drive. Kept permanently on the horns of this dilemma, women remain inactive, unsure of themselves, and therefore easily socially controlled (i.e. oppressed). To break out of this dilemma, we need to create a new 'female' personality, in which our powerful sexuality is fully integrated. This would mean not only reclaiming our sexual drive, but also re-discovering our assertiveness, our self confidence and our personal autonomy. Through this re-making of our female personalities we would be propelled into re-making our 'female place in the world'. Studies of the psychological make-up of persons who become involved in social action have found that the activist were those whose behaviour and attitudes were governed by feelings of 'inner-directedness' and personal autonomy (*Wilcox*). Denying women their full sexual autonomy is one of the ways in which male society ensures that women experience themselves as powerless and unable therefore to change the conditions of their lives.

The power of female sexuality

Faced with the threat of more and more women demanding their sexual rights, our male society has tried to absorb and neutralise that threat. It has appeared to accept the demand as legitimate and allow women more apparent sexual freedom but *only* while our sexuality remains firmly within the original male definition. The only freedom we have been allowed is the freedom to make ourselves more readily available sexual objects. 'Young women by the score still limp away bruised in spirit from sexual encounters they initiate under the banner of sexual freedom, but with an archaic stance of 'Take me' that acknowledges the male as actor and themselves as objects.' (*Rossi*). To engage in more sexuality within the framework of a male definition, can only further reduce our self esteem, and thereby trap us ever more firmly in our powerless female role. The way out of this is to find ways in which sexual involvement no longer *reduces* our self esteem but increases it. Freedom of choice and complete sexual autonomy must be basic prerequisites of any attempted redefinition.

We must come to see quite clearly that 'women's sexuality has been suppressed in the name of monogamy at the service of a man-centred civilisation'. (*Rossi*) We must understand the connection between suppressed sexuality and social powerlessness.

When we reclaim our sexuality we will have reclaimed our belief in ourselves as women. When this intense and powerful part of our nature is no longer suppressed we will refuse to do meekly as we are told. We will refuse to be compliant, submissive and weak. We will demand and achieve our rightful equality. A woman who is directly in touch with her own forceful sexual capacity would no longer tolerate being told that she is inherently passive, essentially masochistic, and that she will only find true

fulfilment in submitting to a man. To such a woman, these ideas would be absurd. She would no more be prepared to suppress her sexuality than to suppress or subordinate herself in any other sphere of her life. Having finally come to realise the reality of her own power, she would never again relinquish it.

Angela Hamblin
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Sexuality & Submission

It is in woman's privatised domestic role that we see the roots of her social position. The family remains one of the many institutions through which the State perpetuates the social order in which we live, and the family is particularly important for analysis in the women's movement since it is the woman who is the fulcrum of the family and her destiny is most closely associated with it.

While family forms have changed over the generations, the assumption that woman's place is in the home has persisted, and despite the erosion of many of its functions, the ideology supporting it in combination with the changing needs of capitalism perpetuates its material basis.

It is clear, for example, that Social Service cuts carried out by both Labour and Tory administrations, while being a direct attack on the living standards of the working class, also shore up the belief that ultimately family units must look after themselves without relying on the collective responsibility of society. The effect is to reassert the primacy of the nuclear family.

This demonstrates the need to understand just how much the ruling class has invested in the perpetuation of the nuclear family unit; not the least of it being the inevitable confinement of women to an isolated domestic world, hived off from the more naked class antagonisms experienced in the area of social production.

This article attempts to look specifically at only one facet of private life - sexuality.

Submission from within

It is useful to note first how repression of sexuality has

often been used by capitalism as a vital weapon in the conditioning of workers to submit, apparently spontaneously, to an authoritarian labour system. Edward Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* illustrates the ideological restraints imposed on the poor by methodism, which penetrated deep into the ranks of the working class, and which specifically attacked sexuality. A classic instance of the potency of ideology - by generating compulsion and submission from within it obviates the need to impose it from without.

This lesson is not lost on the ultra right in our own era. The *East-West Digest*, a journal which sees itself as 'a contribution to national security, and to the furtherance of freedom in Communist countries', recently had an article regailing everyone from the Yippies to Left-Labour MPs and Women's Liberation for eroding authoritarian social values.

Anything that breaks down the family and traditional morality helps break down law and order just as surely as do demos or illegal picketing.

Clearly the ruling class makes the connection between sexual morality and submission to the established order - but do we?

Self determination

To return briefly to the family, the economic dependence of a woman on a man does not only leave her economically dependent, it impinges on her whole identity. And just as the perpetuation of private domestic economy denies women economic self determination, so does it ultimately deny them political and sexual determination.

Within the male dominated domestic world woman's identity hinges on her relationship to a man. She is not seen as a worker, she is seen as a wife. By the same token, her sexuality is defined by men, and her experience of herself as a sexual being tends to be derived from a male

experience of her.

She is a sexual object. In general men are not sexual objects for women because our whole culture has focussed on a male concept of womanhood.

Thus woman's sexual pleasure tends to be felt as a response to man's pleasure in her, so that her pleasure is assumed to lie in being related to, rather than in her own sexual self expression and in her response and relationship to him as another sexual being. Taken a stage further women can be seen as sexual objects both for men and for themselves.

Women's sexual credentials are primarily derived from their physical appearance, how they look, how they move, how they perform as sexual objects - and it is herself as a sexual object that woman has to promote.

Most of us fail as 'successful' sexual objects. But the dynamics of failure may be no less important in the repression of women. How better to undermine us, than to infiltrate into our very identity the fifth column of inferiority and self hatred.

Objectification erodes independence, active expression of women's physical and emotional potential - which must necessarily impinge on our general capacity to function as social beings. In sexual terms, it is most likely simply to prompt activity, love, lust or whatever in someone else, and this has often been assumed to be sufficient for women's sexual gratification. If women are passive, it is because objectification prevents them being otherwise.

Of course things have changed over the years; we don't just endure sex any longer. It has been converted into a wonder of the world. We used to lie back and think of England. Now we lie back and think of the heavens, a cosmic cavern yawning open revealing glinting lights stretching into infinity or maybe it is a consuming fire which inflames our whole being. 'It's the most beautiful thing that can happen to you,' said one of my teachers. Precise-

ly, it happens to you. You don't do it, it's done to you.

One of the problems in looking at this subject is the great difficulty in actually defining what women are, want, or can do. What is so characteristic of so much that is written of women's sexuality is that it is never really defined at all. It is worth taking a look at some of the most typical strands of thought on women's sexuality. Often the criteria which seem to be applied still derive from male experience. An examination of women's sexuality is thus simply comparative. As a result of such comparison women's sexuality is only seen in the negative. It is simply something which men's is not.

Emotional not physical

Men's sexuality is described in our culture as real, concrete, urgent, visible. By comparison women's sexuality is seen as the opposite. Consequently, instead of applying completely different criteria which relate specifically to women, analysis of women's sexuality avoids physical experience and often relies solely on their supposed emotional responses.

Thus women's sexual climax becomes a fire, a raging eruption, a fever seizing mind and body, a heavenly excursion into some ethereal dimension. But it isn't physical. It isn't quite real.

Even Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, regarded as one of the most comprehensive works on women's sexuality, often fails to transcend male orientated definitions, and tends to sink into swamps of almost metaphysical symbolism.

Male excitement is keen but localised, and - except perhaps at the moment of orgasm - leaves the man quite in possession of himself; woman, on the contrary, really loses her mind; for many this effect marks the most voluptuous moment of the love affair, but it also has a

magical and fearsome quality.

Magical mush.

It is worth looking at the implications of what she is saying here. Firstly, it is doubtful if many men or women would experience it that way. Secondly, the nearest we get to a definition is that woman 'loses her mind'. No definition. Only an elevation of mental abandon, a non-physical mental convulsion.

Power without responsibility

The crucial import of this is that she perpetuates acquiescence in woman's passivity. Indeed she admits that it is still true that the sexual role of women is largely passive, but she strives to invest this with approbation, and superlative propensities.

If man,

lusts after the flesh while recognising her freedom, she feels herself to be the essential, her integrity remains unimpaired while she makes herself object, she remains free in the submission to which she consentsthe man's potency reflects the power she exercises upon him.

So the object has power. But power without responsibility. In an age of escalating expectation of sexual activity and excitement, the persistence of women's passivity can give rise to violent contradictions - at least at a subliminal level to rape. Not simply the violation of the unwilling maid. But the violation of the 'magic spell' of women's sexual silence.

There is no lack of imagery to reinforce the merging of phallic conquest with rape. The Beatles, to think of one of the most universally consumed commercial-cultural phenomena of our time, more than once express the phallus as a murderous weapon. 'Happiness is a warm gun' and *Hi Hi Hi*, the Wings single, declares:

I'm going to do it to you, do it to you, do it to you,

like it's never been done.

Lie on the bed, get you ready for my body gun.

This is reminiscent of posters shown in London Tube Stations recently advertising a skin flick called *Maid in Sweden*. They showed photographs of a woman lying on a bed, hair scattered across the pillow, with a look of what one presumes was supposed to be ecstasy on her face, which was taut and gasping. Ecstasy but no joy. Ecstasy submerged in agony. Being fucked hard, so hard that it hurts.

Perhaps this is all stretching a point too far. Perhaps it is a media myth, which does not correspond to most people's reality, which is at least mediated by affection.

But at least at the subliminal level, it suggests a compulsion to bust through the dead hand of passivity, which could understandably provoke violence in the male, trapped by the predictability of dominance. Certainly, for current generations of young people reared in an age in which sexual satisfaction for women is seen as being important, women have expected more of sex, and concessions have been made.

Even the enlightened 'tasteful' approaches of, for example, the eastern love manuals like the *Kama Sutra* and *The Perfumed Garden* remain entirely within the pale of sexist sex. They also run the risk of both detaching the physical from all other facets of personality and, by offering universal blueprints, separating the practise of sex from individual needs and desires, and from spontaneity. The whole concept contained within them of lovemaking as an art reduces it to a mechanical routine albeit a more inventive routine than might be proposed in more banal sex manuals. Lovemaking as an art is no art - it is painting by numbers.

Another danger lies in simply acknowledging the need for 'foreplay' and 'stimulation' of women, because they are still little more than what a man does to a still largely passive woman.

The mechanical approach to the nature and function of sex can lead in its extremes to the dislocation of people's sexuality from their communication with and pleasure in each other so that it becomes an industry within itself, committed to ever more extraordinary permutations, an industry in which both men and women are reduced to objects. Thus the *Kama Sutra* and the endless pursuit of novelty can conspire to reduce sex to a kind of bedroom Olympics, in which the protagonists can donate each other medals for doing it endlessly every night sixty nine different ways, invoking whatever artifacts come to hand from Mars bars to Coke bottles.

Implicit in all this is the spirit of competition, both between the protagonists themselves and everyone around them. How often has the seed of sexual doubt been sewn because we don't 'do it' a million times a night swinging from the light bulb.

Symptom of the system

The pathological pursuit of novelty, of stimulation, as if it could rescue people from the banality and alienation of their psychological reality is not only an expression of dehumanised sexuality, it is also a symptom of a social system in which waste and consumer renewal are important factors. Compulsive consumerism impinges on all facets of aesthetic and social life, so that intimate human relationships in turn mirror the transience and planned obsolescence of capitalist society.

The frantic search for sexual novelty should also be seen in a context of the contradictions within an established puritanical, anti-sex morality in which the right to free pursuit of sexual commercialisation vies with anti-pornography, pro-censorship reaction.

Certainly, some men and women have managed to eke out of this contradiction a greater measure of sexual freedom. With the erosion of some guilt and taboos, some

women are able to enjoy increasing respect and love for their own bodies, and those of men and other women.

It is vital, therefore, that the women's movement should begin to articulate both women's social and sexual aspirations. It seems that little has been written in great depth from within the movement of the nature of women's sexuality (despite the allegation hurled at us that we are only obsessed with our orgasms or the lack of them). And it also seems that although consciousness raising has expressed man's 'private' problems as symptoms of political oppression, sexuality has not been so easily discussed or understood.

One of the few, and one of the earliest of the women's movements examinations of female sexuality is Anna Koedt's pamphlet *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm* which asserts that the 'establishment of the clitoral orgasm would threaten the heterosexual institution because it would indicate that sexual pleasure was obtainable from either men or women, thus making heterosexuality not an absolute option. This opens the whole question of human relationships beyond the confines of the present system.'

A couple of comments on this could be that while the claims of the clitoris *may* be threatening to heterosexuality and indeed probably are for many men they *need* not be. Furthermore, it would be a mistake to confine consideration of sexuality to the achievement of orgasm and to an obsession with the erogenous zones, for this would deny an important intervention that could be made in taking sex beyond the tyranny of orgasm and the concentration on the genital area at the expense of a more generalised sensuality. The danger of the genital obsession is that it can create objects within objects. That woman - the object par excellence - becomes simply a compendium of erogenous zones. For men, this can mean that the prick is almost detached from the rest of his physical personality, and may be the sole source of his physical involvement.

As for women, this lays to waste the rest of his physical geography. This is compounded because since women tend not to be sexually active, not to make love, his body is often left largely ignored and unloved. It also perpetuates a form of sexual activity which, far from being a totally sensuous experience, limits it, in his case to a narrow progression from erection to ejaculation. Furthermore, because of the determining role men play in sex, this means that instead of enjoying what could be described as an open ended intimate physical conversation, sex can be confined to a kind of time and motion study in which lovemaking is reduced to a restrictive industrial practise involving simply genital stimulation and climax.

At least now, within the women's movement itself, and among men who are informed by and sensitive to, the women's struggle, more and more people are striving to discover not only their own capacity for coping with sexuality, but changing the whole nature and function of sex, whether it be heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual relationships.

Clearly the solution is a political one - one in which the destruction of capitalism as an economic system is wedded to the erosion of a authoritarian and repressive sexual relationships in which women's self expression in particular is denied. This is not to say end capitalism and all else will follow, because too often women's liberation and the transformation of personal relationships have been glibly attached as an afterthought to the 'real' revolution. This one dimensional view of the real revolution derives from an economist view, which fails to analyse the real extent to which all our institutions and relationships manifest and purvey bourgeois, sexist values. It is, therefore, not committed to the simultaneous transformation of all human relations; economic, political, psychological and sexual. If revolutionary change is to be comprehensively socialist, it must include all these dimensions. An inescapable function

of revolutionary and feminist movements must be to express the need to change not only domestic organisation - to collectivise the hitherto privatized functions of the family - but to confront at every point the sexist definitions of womanhood which arise from this.

It is certain that unless this ideological confrontation takes place, not solely in the privacy of our own homes, but in the public, political arena where it belongs, then socialist movements will continue to acquiesce to some degree or other in bourgeois institutions and thought.

Sexuality has no mean place in this struggle because it is embedded in the whole formation of our character structures. Women's sexual passivity and objectification undermines their functioning as autonomous individuals.

Needless to say, this struggle will pass through many stages, including for some women practises which may not seem intrinsically desirable. Acknowledgment of lust, acceptance of so-called promiscuity must be recognised as potentially inevitable stages in some women's escape from sexual conformity. At best, perhaps, we can have more room to explore and manoeuvre, and at worst shore up and mystify persisting and pervasive oppression.

It is important in this context to be alert to the short-sightedness of seeking absolute personal solutions which neglect the need to integrate private change with overall political change. Our lives will change, must change, as we struggle within capitalism. But the limitations of possible individual achievement can only be recognised in a collective political context of struggle, analysis and support.

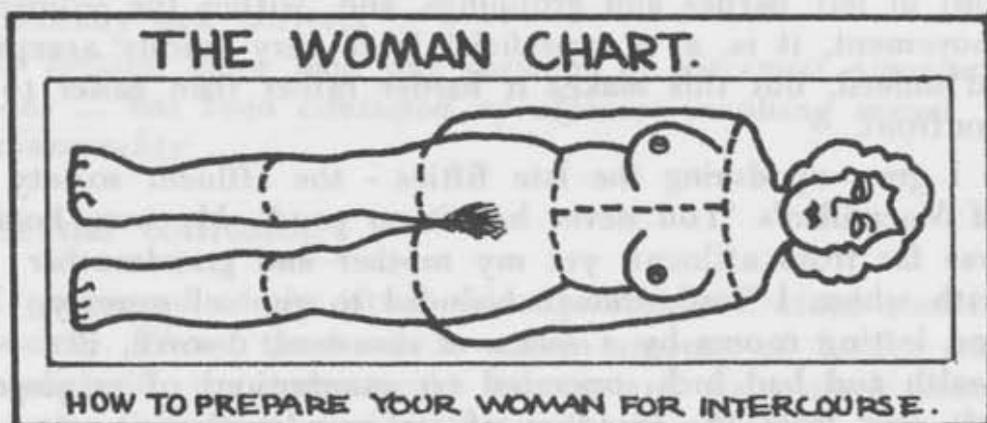
The seizure of superficially alternative life styles is too often posed as a solution. Without wishing to diminish the significance and courage of some of those alternatives, it is important to remember that since they coexist with capitalism they can be distorted because they mirror its mores and often amount to 'the same only different'.

Yet it remains important to acknowledge the value of a plurality of relationships and forms.

The Radical Lesbians wrote in *Notes from the Third Year* that 'what is crucial is women disengaging from male defined response patterns'. But there is more to it than that - for the intervention of women in determining how sexuality is to be expressed need not simply end in evolving 'new response patterns' for this can just as easily end in exchanging one mechanical blueprint for another. The potency of women's intervention in the sexual arena lies in the possibilities of shedding the whole mythology of masculinity and femininity.

Beatrix Campbell

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Gayness & Liberalism

Ever since the Bristol Women's Conference it has seemed important that there should be some discussion of the role of gay women in the women's movement. Since I am myself gay, it's natural that I should have thought a lot about this this, but, although I don't think my personal life gives me any particular right to speak on the subject, in another way I feel that perhaps I do have a responsibility to at least try to explain why I, as a Marxist, am not a Radical F'emunist and yet do, at the same time, feel it's important to see homosexuality as more than a mere matter of private choice. I decided to begin by describing some of my personal experiences not because I want to exhibit myself, but in the hope that this might make clearer why a liberal attitude to homosexuality isn't enough, and is, in fact, insulting to homosexuals. There is increasing liberalism towards homosexuals not only in the whole of society, but also in left parties and groupings, and, within the women's movement, it is, at a superficial level, very readily accepted indeed, but this makes it harder rather than easier to confront.

I grew up during the late fifties - the affluent society of Macmillan's 'You never had it so good'. My own home was far from affluent, yet my mother and grandmother with whom I lived, though reduced to genteel poverty, and letting rooms by a series of disasters, divorce, ill health and bad luck, operated on assumptions of privilege left over from the grandeur of my grandmother's past. She lived on memories of country houses, servants, the Indian Empire and a luxurious Edwardian heyday.

Their unhappiness made me ill at ease and peculiar. I couldn't cope with the contrast between them and the liberal academic private school I had been sent to, where the other girls came from the families of well off London

intellectuals. These girls were sophisticated and many of them had boyfriends when my fantasy life still centred largely around girls and women. Partly because I was a social misfit I came to feel I was a sexual misfit too; and this came to seem very exciting, strange and evil. To be attracted to another girl seemed unmentionable, horrifying. I also came across the theme of the homosexual as damned in the books I read (e.g. French 19th century literature and novels). These seemed to confirm a vision of myself as Satanic, doomed and alone. Yet of course, this pose gave me a certain feeling of superiority. At least I would never be ordinary.

Other people sometimes react to homosexuals in this way too. Because homosexuality faces them with something they find threatening, they can cease to see you as human, and instead you become sinister; disturbing because you seem, whether purposely or not, someone who doesn't respond or conform to the deep 'natural' laws of family and procreation. To give an example of the way in which homosexuality is still equated with evil and madness, the Sunday Times (19.8.73) ran a sensational article on terrorism which set out to prove that all terrorists were mad, mentally sick perverts ...

In Britain, more than one member of extremist organisations ... has been convicted of offences involving sexual abnormality

Sexual confusion

I progressed to the ritual ridden world of Oxford student society. There, there was a certain amount of furtive sex, along with the walnut cake for tea and six o'clock sherry parties (it really was like that). At school I'd been totally isolated. In the more unreal world of Oxford I found it easier to achieve the semblance of relationships but I could never feel at ease or come to grips with myself because the competition for social and intellectual success made it impossible for me to ever know what I really wanted.

When I first arrived I was shocked to discover that what

most of the women wanted was marriage. I was really stunned by this, my brain being the only aspect of myself I'd ever been taught to respect or feel positive about; and also I'd somehow got hold of Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, and she did after all, whatever we think of her now, rightly argue the necessity for women to fight for economic independence. And in a way I was right - though what I wanted, not white tulle and wedding bells, but the vague, imaginary kind of success, to be on a par with the men, was no better. Anyway, I think it was really only possible to succeed in competition with the men if you, as a girl, had terrific self confidence and could succeed both 'as a man' and as a sex object.

I told some of the women in my college that I thought I was a lesbian and was upset and humiliated when they reacted either by brushing it aside as a phase or else by looking on me as neurotic rather than sinful. This attitude of 'you are sick' rather than 'you are wicked' was actually the more undermining of the two.

This is still the most usual attitude in society today; in this scheme of things, the homosexual is an inferior being unable by reason of his or her hangups to achieve a relationship with a member of the opposite sex. A homosexual is to be pitied for he or she is less than the 'normal' man or woman. As Anthony Storr, well known psychiatrist and apologist for sexism, puts it: *Lesbians do not know what they are really missing. (Sexual Deviation, Pelican)*. This view lacks the positive strength of wickedness. I certainly felt I was ugly, awkward, wrong; but I was no longer magnificent and tortured ('Evil, be thou my good'), just a squalid social casualty, victim of my socially embarrassing background. If only I'd had a Daddy, everything would have been OK.

Men did take me out, of course, and I told some of them too about my 'problem'. They, understandably, were even less able to help than my friends, for they were either alarmed or aroused by the information - interestingly, they all saw it in terms not of me, but of their own virility. I'd hung the label 'lesbian' round my neck before I

came to university because I was so obsessed by my feelings about women, yet what that label did, once I was there, was prevent me from developing any understanding of my feelings towards men. Because I could only have men, I could only want women. Men attracted me sexually, but I hated the relationships they expected to have with me, in which I was expected to be totally passive yet responsive, vivacious and charming, putting on an act of entertainment for them the whole time. I think I should have liked to have men who were friends, but this was not possible, for me at any rate, so I ended up by being what was then called tarty. I could roll about on sofas and in punts with men I hardly knew, - and usually didn't want to know because that was satisfactorily unreal and unimportant. And while I was doing it, I was *always* saying to myself inside my head 'I'm really a lesbian' - whatever that meant, since I'd never had a complete sexual relationship with a woman.

When I did finally meet and start an affair with another woman, I immediately became very dependent on her, because, believing as I did, that homosexuals were all doomed to misery (because that is what you read in all the books on the subject), a happy relationship was something to cling to as hard as you could.

Sexual typecasting

We entered the Swinging Sixties together and became the 'white negros' of a rather pleasure seeking, but mildly political group of academics in the midlands. What she and I gave each other that was positive - and there was a lot - was always subtly distorted by our living in this liberal, heterosexual world. I did not, in the beginning, see her as male, but everyone else did, largely because she had a higher status job than me. The men she worked with gave her recognition as a honorary man. She could fancy birds and drink pints, but I remained 'feminine'. Yet I still preferred women or could only find a woman, so I was the woman's woman, which made me the lowest of

the low. This world, where we imagined we were freed from the domination of men, was shot through with male assumptions and male values. And it was the men, I think, who liked our company; most of the wives and girl friends either saw us as manless and therefore to be pitied, or else a special kind of rival and thus not to be trusted. But we were so grateful for being accepted that we never even noticed the price we were paying (and nor did anyone else, since there was certainly nothing deliberate or malicious about all of this).

This then was our place in the permissive society - to make our friends feel liberated and progressive by 'accepting' us, without their having to feel any challenge to their own sexual identity.

We had a second separate social life centring around the 'gay scene' in London. There we were also typecast, as a stable couple, in a group in which stability was much prized; and here too we were pressured to play the roles of male and female, 'butch' and 'femme', even though in the class conscious scene such role playing was much more open and exaggerated among working class than among middle class women; the more middle class we were, the more you emphasised equality and 'sharing' - but only in the way 'straight' middle class couples do. That was still the standard we measured ourselves against.

This scene too was drenched in liberalism. That is, we *said* it was OK for everyone to do their own thing; you could sleep with who you wanted and you shouldn't be jealous; a good relationship was an open relationship; you shouldn't make moral judgments about sexual behaviour - an extreme of liberalism that clashed violently with the wish to 'succeed' as a stable lesbian couple, and often led to hysterical exaggerations of feeling, while at the same time, a kind of shallowness in a world from which children were almost wholly absent, so that what is usually the *material* reason for fidelity was missing, gave an air of unreality to the scenes and dramas.

Many of us were obsessed with clothes and our image.

There was one particular group of women who seemed to associate together on the basis of all being very rich and beautiful. They all had affairs with one another - a tiny incestuous clique. I remember a party of theirs we went to in a Dolphin Square flat where there was no furniture at all except an enormous bed surrounded by mirrors and hundreds of bottles and jars of make-up and scent - just like something out of a movie.

For lesbianism, while remaining unacceptable, can still become a mask of assurance to hide behind. I myself did not have many extra marital 'affairs'. I was on the whole timid and faithful, and hid behind my lover, while feeling more and more resentful of her. We developed many of the worst features of a 'straight' couple. Having lived through this, I am suspicious of women in the movement who proclaim lesbianism as a solution to sexism in men, for lesbianism too can be sexist. When either of us did have an affair, these relationships, instead of challenging the nature of our coupledness, actively reinforced our mutual dependence - sometimes we even ganged up on a lover, whose belittlement or destruction strengthened us. Of course, this was never deliberate. But outside affairs are very far from necessarily challenging the dependence of the couple, or encouraging personal autonomy. Indeed, a whole literature has grown up of 'swingers' (couples who exchange partners on weekends or go in for group sex) and 'horizontal enrichment' (i.e. affairs on the side), the *stated* purpose of which is to strengthen the 'open marriage'.

Along with our friends, we drifted towards Marxism as the sixties wore on. This was, to begin with, a largely intellectual conviction and when the women's movement arose we at first rejected it as petty bourgeois. This, at least, was what we said, but I think it must have been more a result of our feeling cut off from the experience of most women, cut off, perhaps, from ourselves as women. With the gay movement we did, however, on the other hand, immediately identify, and this led to great changes in our lives. We separated and formed new relationships and were somehow freed to be politically active.

I think one reason for this was that in its beginnings the great explosive positive thing about gay liberation was the feeling that there were hundreds of homosexuals who were not afraid to assert their homosexuality. It no longer had to be discreetly hidden. That was a truly liberating experience, and although perhaps gay liberation was essentially a liberal movement, its slogans *Gay is Good* and *Gay is Proud* are important in challenging the oppression and repression of homosexuals. Gay people really are oppressed, although their oppression is a peculiar one since it rests partly on the possibility of always remaining hidden and invisible. This was the reason for the stress on 'Coming Out' in gay liberation.

The lesson to myself of my life during the decade of the sixties is that I could be tolerated as a homosexual provided I could be stereotyped. That way I did not challenge society, by wanting, for instance, to bring up children. One of the Dolphin Square women I mentioned earlier did transgress this unwritten rule by privately adopting a baby. The Welfare Officer concerned discovered her lesbian relationship and it was only because the adoption was a private one and had already gone over more or less all legal hurdles that it was not reversed, and indeed the Welfare Officer did try to bring a Court Action to do this.

Mothers who subsequently become gay not infrequently have their children removed from them. It is as if women are so deeply repressed sexually, that should they themselves try to divorce their sexuality from their reproductive function, they call down a terrible retribution from society. Indeed, the whole way in which lesbians are treated illustrates the extent to which women still are not seen as having a sexuality of their own. Even lesbian pornography is produced for men; to see female sexuality as autonomous would presumably be too threatening.

Bisexuality

Occasionally, when we lived in the Midlands, we did sleep with men, and that made us feel even more liberal and liberated.

I want to say more about bisexuality, since to be bisexual is perhaps to reach the high point of sexual liberalism. It's important to recognise that bisexuality is ambiguous politically as well as sexually.

A distinction, in my view, must be made between bisexuality in the 'future society' and bisexuality in the present. If we see sexuality as a line drawn from pure homosexuality at one end to pure heterosexuality at the other (the way Kinsey saw it), we might suppose that in a freer society than ours more people would be nearer the centre of the line and fewer driven to the extremes at either end. And although this two dimensional view of sexuality perhaps blots out some of its complexities and the differences would be greater than this, even as things are, many, perhaps even the majority of us, are capable of being attracted by individuals of both sexes. Ideally perhaps we should all be able to relate sexually to a much wider variety of people of both sexes and all ages, but this remains an ideal for the future, rather than a present reality.

Individuals on the left who do not wish to condemn homosexuals sometimes express the view that people should be free to choose whether they are heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual, or even say that people are actually able to do so. This is liberal because it is based on incorrect ideas about the possibility of free choice. It is simply not true that these three categories offer the same possibilities and I don't see how they could as things are. Heterosexuality *must* remain the norm so long as we retain the narrow nuclear family. In our society the nuclear family harnesses sexuality and reproduction firmly together. This disciplines men, women and children, and is one reason why homosexuality, in challenging this, is seen as threatening and subversive. It *is* subversive, it *does* challenge authoritarian gender roles, and gay men or women, sexist though they can be and mystified as they often are, do objectively have less stake in the status quo than adults who are harnessed to a family in its present depleted form. The family man is the reliable worker, and homo-

sexuals, in spite of increasing tolerance, frequently find it impossible to 'come out' at work - i.e. where they depend economically upon capitalism. Who, for example, has ever met a gay health visitor, shop steward, judge or secretary?

And in spite of more tolerance, gays are still, to a great extent, relegated to the rather dingy underworld of the 'gay ghetto' where the worst features of straight society are exaggerated - sexual exploitativeness and competition for example - or else exist in secrecy. For secret homosexuality is perhaps the most common of all - married men who 'cruise' when they're away from home; married women who sleep together when their husbands are away - homosexuality as a substitute, as wholly alienated, or as co-opted and contained.

Sexual consumerism

Bisexuality is different again, as it exists at present. It has no social recognition - no 'role' - and is often used as a cover up for something else. It usually means a secondary liking for one sex in the context of a primary relationship with the other sex. It can be a kind of sexual consumerism in individuals who are largely straight but want more and better of everything, 'orgasms included': or worse, it can be a way of avoiding 'coming out' and confronting the fact that you are actually homosexual. It is often used as a put down to gay people (if you were really liberated you'd be bisexual). Bisexuality is the Permissive Society's solution to homosexuality, and the extent to which it can be political is therefore very limited.

I feel that some women who have hitherto been heterosexual do see in an exploration of sexual relationships with other women a way of both personal and political development. While this is not to be put down, I think it would be a mistake to see it as a solution, and it may even be a very different *experience* from that of women who have always felt they were gay. For example, the following quotation is taken from a *Guardian* article on Women's Liberation (29.11.73). The words are those of a young woman being interviewed.

Not long ago I made the intellectual decision to become bisexual. I've had sexual relationships with two women, both of whom were close friends anyway. It's slower and more relaxed with women - more like a mirror image - with men the emphasis is always on doing so it's different with women....I'm in love with a bloke just now...

My own experience in no way relates to what this woman is saying, since I have always experienced my sexual feelings for women as more, not less, violent, compelling and active than my feelings for men.

But obviously, each individual develops differently. I am not saying that one set of feelings is 'correct' or that some gays are more equal than others. Lesbianism cannot, however, solve the problems of women under capitalism. At the Bristol conference, there was an entertainment on the Saturday night - the Sister Show - which suggested that lesbianism is the highest expression of sisterhood and the ultimate way forward. Some women were upset by this and by a blanket anti-men stance that ignored or rejected class struggle. On Sunday afternoon there was a debate about this. While it was going on, I happened to want a cup of coffee and on my way to the canteen I passed a small room on the doorway of which was pinned a notice saying 'Gay women's meeting'. Looking in I recognised women I had seen or known in Gay Liberation, women who lived out homosexuality before the Women's Movement decided it was respectable. These women presumably did not see that debate about the Sister Show as relevant to them, and I feel there must be something wrong with this very loudly voiced and ideological gayness if women whose first identification is as gay find it irrelevant.

In any case, the point isn't whether we should be nice to men and help liberate them the while we're all fighting capitalism, nor whether we should kick them out of the present and future societies altogether. The real point is the liberation of all women to find their own autonomous sexuality.

Having seen the seamy side of a world in which everyone is officially 'normal', I could never want everyone to be officially gay, so that straight people were hidden out of sight in an underworld, or cut off from their sexuality altogether. Those on the left who assert that this is what all homosexual activists do want are simply wrong, or feeling threatened. In claiming that homosexuality is a form of bourgeois decadence they are confusing cause and effect. The life I led in the sixties was decadent, not because I am gay, but because all bourgeois life is in a state of decadence, and gay people are the poseurs, the camp jesters, the extreme manifestation of that decadence. And to say that there will be no homosexuals under socialism also seems very unlikely to be true, since a socialist revolution presupposes an upsurge of energy, and a release of all kinds of feeling, as happened in Russia for a few years, not more repression and stultification. Obviously in a truly socialist society there would be a much wider variety of possible relationships, not a blanket imposition of one particular kind.

I'm not sure why the traditional left has got caught up in these puritanical myths, nor why many of them seem to believe that no working class people are gay, which is very far from being the case. They are just more oppressed and repressed than middle class homosexuals.

I have experienced homosexuality as a romantic ideal, and as a prison. It is only during the last few years that I have been able even to begin to experience it as a form of freedom. I do not want lesbianism distorted into some kind of ideal in the women's movement or anywhere else. I simply want us all to fight to free ourselves so that we can apprehend our real feelings more fully, whether we are straight or gay.

Postscript

Since I wrote this piece, Lesbianism has been further discussed in the women's movement. There has been another National Women's Conference, this time in Edinburgh (in June 1974) at which two further demands were added to the original Four Demands of the women's movement. One of these demands was for the recognition of the validity of lesbianism, and for the recognition of each woman's right to her own autonomous sexuality. The feeling that there should be a demand related to the position of lesbians stemmed from an earlier conference, for gay women, organised in the spring, and before the demand was adopted at Edinburgh an afternoon was spent by the whole conference in a discussion of it.

It seems too that the position of Radical Feminists, or Separatists, is now more forcefully articulated in the women's movement. Separatists are those women who believe that the oppression of women springs primarily from the patriarchal power position of men, and that this domination of women by men precedes any form of class society and is more fundamental than class struggle. The belief in the sisterhood of all women transcends the notion of class solidarity between men and women who share a particular relationship to the means of production. Women should therefore devote their energy to living and working with women, rather than dissipating themselves in party politics and left groups.

On re-reading my original article, I feel that I failed to explain my opposition to Separatism. For me, Separatism is an over-simplified position, though it expresses a very real gut feeling many women have about men: 'Get lost - we've had enough.' The trouble is, this denies the reality that, in practice, women's interests diverge. The woman screw (prison officer) perceives herself as on the opposite side from the woman prisoner, and vice versa. Seldom, if ever, will these two groups unite in sisterhood; their power relationship prevents this. And in practice, women agitating around the question of women's conditions in prison will

also find themselves in conflict with the screws. White women can be racist about black women. Or to put it another way, do we want the Queen at women's liberation conferences?

If you are a Separatist it follows quite naturally that lesbian relationships become an important part of life-style politics and, excluding men as they do, may be seen as a solution to the dominance of women by men in society. 'If all women ejected men from their beds and their lives — the general strike of women — then the battle would be won.' A few Separatists take it further and see in 'cloning' and other experimental forms of reproduction the final solution, since were such methods to be used to reproduce the human race, there would no longer be a biological need for men's existence at all.

It is important to stress the advantages and all the good things about sexual relationships between people of the same sex, if only because homosexuals have been so put down and belittled by those who dominate our society — represented in the past by priests, today by psychiatrists and criminologists etc. But I found it difficult in my article to stress this and at the same time to say that I still feel heterosexual relationships also have validity. I found it difficult because I attempted an intellectual justification of what must I think remain a feeling: my life experience has not brought me to a point of hating all men, and I do believe relationships between men and women can express genuine love and warmth, even though I also believe that sexism and male attitudes of domination and superiority run very deep and express themselves in many different ways, both crude and subtle.

My personal experience of relationships is that all the people I know, men and women, straight and gay, experience problems as they try to get beyond the traditional male and female roles. You do not have to be in the women's movement or part of the left to notice — as bourgeois sociologists have done — that we demand so much of the couple, while it is not an especially flexible social form. It is only common sense to say that of course we

all have difficulties, lesbians like anyone else; and those in the women's movement who see in a lesbian relationship the solution for their own and society's problems will be disappointed.

Perhaps this is a liberal position! I don't know how significant it is that my article aroused no interest whatsoever from Separatists, but many bisexual and heterosexual women felt uneasy about it. Did I mean that all women who hadn't been lesbians all their lives were necessarily liberal in their attitudes? Was I putting down the experiences of bisexual women as somehow less 'authentic' than those of lesbians? I think they sussed out an ambiguity in the article, which was that I was trying to say at one and the same time that I don't feel superior to bisexual women, but that I do feel they should recognise that my experience - as someone who felt she was a lesbian in her adolescence with all the isolation that that entailed - is a *different* experience from the woman who begins to have lesbian relationships in the relatively supportive environment of the women's movement, especially if she is continuing to relate to, even to live with, a man, which does inevitably shield her from the hostility of society.

Perhaps all I can say is that there does exist amongst lesbians a recurring resentment towards bisexual women who seem to be having the best of both worlds. Some lesbians speaking at the Edinburgh conference expressed a bitterness about women they felt had been 'experimenting' at the emotional expense of 'real' lesbians. Another woman expressed her positive feelings about the lesbian relationships she was able to have in a small group of women students, but said that she wouldn't be gay if it meant having to put up with 'oppressive straight-gay scenes, the gay ghetto of the clubs etc.' This also annoyed some lesbians who feel they would *have* to be gay, no matter how unpleasant the circumstances.

These are feelings, emotional responses, and perhaps we can only recognise the validity of all of them. We all need to be more sensitive about one another, so that we can respect and understand one another's very different exper-

iences more fully.

There is also an ambiguity about any definition of bisexuality. My own belief is that most individuals eventually opt in practice for either heterosexuality or homosexuality. Even if, as Freud thought (and as I believe) we are all potentially bisexual in our responses, the constraints of the way in which social life is organised usually means that a choice must be made in the long run.

It is difficult to define liberalism, especially in any discussion of sexuality which is a very unclear and private area of our lives. I would question generally the way in which the women's movement has approached the problems of sexuality. Perhaps the kinds of sexual freedom and liberation we have been seeking are based on bourgeois notions of individual freedom. Perhaps, far from expressing a revolutionary attitude to sexual love, Alexandra Kollontai simply took the bourgeois ideal of romantic love to its logical conclusion. (E.H. Carr *Socialism in One Country*. Section a) The Family) But this should not throw us back onto the alternative offered by some Left groups of a kind of socialist monogamy, which just seems like ordinary old bourgeois monogamy with the problems ironed out. Such a view, which feels that if there were better nursery care and equal pay for women this would solve all *sexual* problems (which are in fact not mentioned), is puritanical, because it denies, by ignoring, the profound change a woman must undergo when, as she becomes independent and freer, she can no longer accept the way in which most men make her a sexual object. Surveys undertaken by Slater and Woodside (1943), by Geoffrey Gorer (1971) and by the French Magazine *Elle* all show only around 50% of women even claiming that they regularly 'achieve orgasms'. This is an unfortunate way of talking about sex, but surely does indicate a real problem.

Are women with equal pay automatically going to enjoy sex more? Will men become more considerate and less repressed as lovers when their wives have a good job and the kids are in a nursery school? Are there more orgasms per head in socialist countries? How much does it matter?

We have hardly even begun to think about sexuality. My article is only part of a very small beginning, and I certainly don't have any answers. But, while I don't feel lesbianism is the solution, I do feel that it must and should be part of any freer society we might hope to make.

Elizabeth Wilson
1974

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The Patter of Tiny Contradictions

Learning Sexism ≠ Femininity

In the process of trying to merge two practices - that of teaching and that of being in women's liberation - my thoughts on women's oppression have always tended to arrive back at the same point: 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. Not as the answer to the crucial question of how it happened or of what came first - but as an explanation of how and when it takes place now.

The question is central to any consideration of girls and education. We experience discrimination as women explicitly on the economic and legal level but it is more important to understand how our oppression becomes entrenched in the way in which we come, from an early age, to interpret and understand our place in society. Various agencies (family, school, mass media) convey a range of meanings to us. We acquire psychological characteristics in keeping with the rigid dichotomy we see between male and female behaviour patterns. We learn to relate in a socially acceptable way. An assumption prevails that the differences we observe derive from biological difference, and that this justifies differential treatment, when in fact the treatment itself causes the difference. The question 'Are men and women necessarily different kinds of people?' is clouded by the fact that they are subject to different cultural influences and moulded into different personality patterns.

Most of us aren't allowed to discern the difference between being female and becoming feminine. Learning our femininity, however imperfectly, is a process of internalising a male culture's definition of our destiny as wives and mothers. All the qualities intrinsic to femininity - docility, submission, altruism, tenderness, striving to be attract-

ive, not being forceful or bold or physically strong, active or sexually potent - also qualify us for a lifetime of servicing, maintaining and comforting men. Whether or not we manage to acquire all these characteristics is not the point; we confine ourselves to sexual and family functions and collude in limiting our possibilities. The carrot dangled in front of us, those female traits which are valuable, those which guarantee immediate success with men, shouldn't blind us to the high price exacted from us by a male culture for them, our freedom, dignity and self respect. To see sex role stereotyping as underpinning women's oppression is one thing, to understand why is another. In *Sex, Gender & Society* (Maurice Temple Smith), Ann Oakley shows the need to distinguish between gender and biological sex when thinking about femininity, and is surprised at *the way in which arguments long believed in have a tendency to remain suspended in thin air by a slender string of passionate and often irreconcilable conviction. They seem not to need foundations to survive.*

But she misunderstands the nature of our social existence. The underlying foundations which stimulated and provoked the arguments are still with us. Far from being suspended in mid-air, they rest on the very real foundations of our economic and political structure.

Female status and definitions of femininity have undergone change, and new ideas corresponding to these changes have arisen, and with them new arguments for sex differential. The most important force affecting this is the differing requirements of the economic system. For social values and attitudes arise out of the social structure which is based on the production process. How woman fits in determines how her role is viewed and how she views herself. But confusion arises when her labour is embodied in people and not in commodities and when it is not waged. This conceals not only the economic importance of what she is doing, but the fact that she has a relation to the economic system at all. A good illustration of this connection between production and ideology is provided by the period of the second world war.

The war economy demanded that women relinquish their 'traditional role' in the home, that being taken over by state nurseries, restaurants and so on. Even the evacuation might be looked upon as freeing the urban female labour force from domestic duties. But with the end of the war, and demob, this was no longer necessary.

The status quo was to be asserted. Beveridge was quite frank: domestic work, he said, was 'vital though unpaid' but without it 'the Nation could not survive'. The nurseries were closed - maternity wings flourished. And, to add weight to this reaction, psychological 'science' was enlisted, providing dire warnings that the traits required for success in industry and the professions would 'distort the character' of women.

The corollary of these mores was the establishment of 'vocational education', the notion that girls should be educated for femininity. This corresponded to the Tripartite system instituted by the 1944 Education Act which justified provision of different types of education for 'different' children. It was ratified 15 years later by the Crowther Report, which recommended that

the prospect of courtship and marriage should rightly influence the education of adolescent girls, their direct interest in dress, personal appearance, in problems of human relationships should be given a central place in their education.

Later on Katherine Ollerenshaw, a contributor to the Newsome Report, wrote:

the incentive for girls to equip themselves for marriage and homemaking is genetic.

Newsome was also important in stating the distinction to be made for the 'clever girl'

More able girls have no time for education specifically related to their careers as women, but the less able do have.

'Less able', within the framework of education, usually means 'working class'.

In school the education transmitted to the female child is connected to the wider process by which she is encour-

aged to 'hold herself in and become feminine'. (Sheila Rowbotham *Women's Consciousness, Man's World* Penguin). The method used to reinforce internalised notions the child already has are both explicit and hidden. Teachers' expectations, attitudes, atmosphere, curriculum, teaching methods all contribute. In some ways school acts as a double-sided mirror providing at the same time a faithful reflection and a vast distortion of reality. School books, particularly early readers, are a powerful example. They present not just a male dominated world, but one more so than present reality. Glenys Lobban (*Forum*) has just finished research into reading schemes. She shows that in them the female world consists almost entirely of domestic activity and child care. Only one showed working mothers - this in a country where most women have paid jobs outside the home. The only physical activity for girls are skipping and hopping, and there is the usual surfeit of heroes. Following the usual pattern, boys take the lead whilst girls watch. The male world they depict lies outside the home and allows for neither expressive nor caring behaviour. Male toys suggest future careers. She summed it up like this:

Reading schemes show the real world peopled by women and girls solely involved in domestic activity, and whom adventurous and innovatory males might occasionally allow into their world in a helpmate capacity.

The structure of the school itself is another factor which ratifies the dominant position of men. School is a hierarchical and bureaucratic institution within which women are subordinate to men. They are the assistant teachers, secretaries, auxiliary workers, cooks, cleaners. Men are the headmasters, heads of departments and caretakers. Although women have traditionally held key posts in female secondary and infant schools there is now a disturbing tendency for them to be ousted from these jobs, given the trend towards comprehensive and co-educational schools. In 1974 out of the 994 mixed comprehensive schools only 53 had female heads. Whilst co-education and the entry of male teachers into primary schools can be positive in undermining sex roles, we must challenge the assumption that 'being a man'

alone qualifies you for promotion. And of course the higher up you are, the more status and prestige is attached to your job, the less likely it is that you will be a woman

Many women are drawn to teaching because it provides the least amount of conflict with the role of wife and mother. It is hardly surprising that children show a certain confusion between the two, frequently substituting 'Mum' for 'Miss'. The connection between the two is that both entail a constant drain of emotional energy. Teaching, like housework, is not clearly defined in terms of hours, you are constantly on duty. In both, the emotional commitment to other people is exploited. Seen in this light, it's not difficult to understand the rabid antifeminism of the National Association of Schoolmasters. Deeply committed to turning the profession into a nine to four job, they resent the women who provide a natural blacklegging force. Having concluded that salaries are low because so many women are employed, they oppose equal pay, camouflaging their attitudes beneath an emphasis on better pay for career teachers. They try to divide teaching unions along sex lines, work to preserve headships and administrative posts for men, and, blatantly stating that the training of women is wasted, they are the one section of teachers openly in favour of discrimination against women. Victims of divide and rule tactics, in the long term their policies can have disastrous effects.

The consciousness of female teachers reflects their subordination to men and is consistent with their motivations to teach and the content of teacher training. This, the lowest sector of higher education, in terms of prestige, is probably that area which could least stand rigorous examination. The bulk of all those women in higher education is concentrated here. The steady trickle of girls through to universities in the sixties seemed to confirm that equal opportunities existed whilst compounding the inferiority of those women who didn't go. Those of us in teacher training were there almost by default - we'd entered a race, kept up a steady pace, yet refused to make the final spurt at the end. The fear of losing, and thus reinforcing our

inferiority, completely immobilised us. Most of us thought we had actually decided to do it, so this clouded the issue.

My college, like most, had academic pretensions but underlying and undermining it was an environment which cocooned you securely from any real mental effort. Right from the beginning we accepted that marriage would be on the agenda long before a teaching job. Student culture, from 'freshers week' and the emphasis of the words of that all too familiar song 'How do you feel when you marry your ideal' to the spoon banging which broke out spontaneously at dinner after news of an engagement, rising to a frenzied crescendo like some primitive initiation rite, only emphasises it more sharply. We examined, with a mixture of curiosity and jealousy, those girls studying with the university men we went out with, subjecting their appearance to harsh scrutiny, not realising, of course, their handicap, having much less time to do what virtually all our existence at college centred around. Three years of filling in time, soaking up ideas second hand, never reading anything in the original, even the Plowden Report. Because somewhere in the space of a childhood tinged with poverty and unhappiness I had invested my trust in the power of education and because the obvious failure of my parents' marriage served as a bitter reminder that it wasn't always 'happy ever after', I resisted some of these pressures. I began to realise that teacher training was second rate and worthless, yet I wasn't able to make the connection between being female and being there. I couldn't understand that the reason we despised men at a similar college so much was because they represented a mirror image of our inferiority. I emerged painfully from college with the dreadful presentiment that I was trapped qualified to work in a woman's world I had grown to despise. For me this meant identifying even more with men clinging parasitically to them, letting them feed me with ideas, living my intellectual aspirations through them.

To a greater or lesser degree this experience affects most female teachers. The National Institute of Industrial Psychiatrists recently surveyed the attitudes of female teachers.

They found that, on the whole, women thought men better in authority, fairer, more patient and generally gained more respect. One third of the sample admitted that they thought that the opposite sex was generally superior, hardly surprising then that female teachers should reinforce sex roles. Given little positive encouragement to examine anything in depth, anything which is so much an accepted part of our existence that it seems insignificant is transmitted unquestioningly. Though they don't create girls' attitudes and interests in feminine role playing they encourage it implicitly by their very attitudes and behaviour.

A further factor is the conflict between femininity and academic motivation. At first sight girls' development seems contradictory. In primary school they learn faster and certainly have verbal superiority over boys. At this stage experience more conflict (*Journal of Educational Psychology*: Asher & Gottman). Taught to be assertive and autonomous outside, school demands obedience and passivity. Girls don't pose the same behavioural problems but the characteristics useful in early education have repercussions higher up. Girls approaching adolescence become aware of femininity and have lower motivation whilst those facets of femininity which encourage girls to accept rather than question impose restrictions. They lead to learning patterns geared to exam preparation, like learning by rote, which are not conducive to later academic success.

Female children themselves collude in this. At play they exclude those of the opposite sex, and exclude themselves on the basis of sex. Even at this point they seem to understand their future position and have learnt to relate in a particular way to men. Pressure from mass media creates even more insecurity and uncertainty. It has certainly increased the pressure on girls to project themselves as sexual objects. If your *raison d'être* is to spark off a response in someone else this must inevitably have debilitating effects on your intellectual development.

But there is some resistance. Research into role behaviour in the young shows that boys show significantly greater preference for their role than girls, who often opt for the

opposite sex role or accept components of both. It seems that workers' children are more aware of sex differences earlier than middle class children, especially middle class girls. The pressures to conform on girls from professional backgrounds are not so great and divergence is more acceptable. Conflict usually comes later. At university they experience a high degree of anxiety - in testing and achieving situations, women will worry not only about failure but also about success. If you fail you are not living up to your own standards of performance; if you succeed you're not living up to the social expectations of the female.

And those who succeed despite the odds face even more obstacles. The anger and disillusionment of women graduates in the late sixties who discovered to their cost that, whatever equal opportunities were presumed to exist, they would still be relegated to the traditional role was one of the contributory factors in the emergence of the women's movement. Although this has been a stick used to beat us with, it is inevitable that it should be these women who saw those contradictions first.

Girls from poorer families who have had to cope with streaming, selection and a cultural gap, are usually the ones who have the greatest difficulty resisting the pressure to adopt the female role and who enter traditional female servicing occupations. Legions of third and fourth year secondary school children testified to the fact that they have assimilated their femininity only too well. The lack of purpose, apathy and alienation they show in the school situation is an indication of their realisation that their future position is dependent less on academic achievement or qualifications than on displaying themselves in relation to a man. Writing love letters to pop stars, or drawing pictures of the shoes they have just bought or dream of, are symptoms of this. Desiring more money with which to achieve this end product means that they drift out of school and into boring nine to five jobs, exploited to the hilt in a boutique, or joining the hordes of girls servicing industry in the typing pool, or exploited and alienated on the production line. Adolescence, the time when pressures to conform are the greatest, is also the time when girls begin to

underachieve. The trouble is, that having once accepted the stereotype of their own inferiority, girls underestimate themselves, are unable to judge their own performance realistically and become afraid of failure. Their expectations, if not already compounded with the differential treatment of the sexes earlier on, and implicit discrimination all the way up the school, will now be reinforced by the rigid separation for vocational courses which takes place at this time.

Having understood the all pervasive way in which sex role stereotyping infiltrates in the minds and self images of girls, not to mention its entrenchment in the school structure, what needs to be asked is: can it be successfully challenged? Even a factor such as the 'sort of school' you attend can affect your possibilities. If there is a differential in the facilities available to girls and boys this will affect their performance. There is now emerging a body of information that shows that at co-ed schools the likelihood for achievement for girls is substantially than at single sex schools. Up to the age of sixteen it is as good as that of boys in all subjects except maths. Within single sex schools, the environment tends to reinforce outside pressures on girls, with an increasing tendency for them to leave school earlier.

It is in this context that the question of overall control of education becomes important. Taken out of the general framework of education, the question of girls and education can become distorted. Education, always at the mercy of the prevailing economic climate, is at this point in time being subject to cuts. The policy of expansion witnessed in previous decades is now being replaced by one of restriction. The choice is between getting mixed schools to give girls access to courses already provided or persuading girls' schools to use their limited resources to introduce courses traditionally regarded as only for boys. The first seems the obvious strategy. Though some women will argue that in mixed schools the differential changes from being rigid to becoming more subtle, the potential is there to undermine the polarity which at present exists between boys' schools, at one pole, with an overtly authoritarian and rigid atmos-

phere, and, at the other pole, the docility and compliance intrinsic to that of girls' schools.

The women's movement, and those teachers within it, have to resist the 'educational fatalism' affecting some elements in the schools, i.e. the idea we have that teachers are helpless in the face of powerful forces that we cannot change. In the last analysis, the changes in education demand the important social reform which will only accompany economic change. In the meantime, we can work towards creating a situation where such a change is possible. We are aware that education, at the moment, contributes to girls' self perceptions. Do we allow this to continue unchallenged? What we could be doing is examining how we can develop a new consciousness.

There is already an important ideological battle being waged within education that we must be part of. Recent studies indicate the way in which a female child's self-identity determines her ability to learn, have brought several responses from educationalists which illustrate the contradictions and struggle between opposing views. Between those who think that education should fulfil the function of allowing and enabling all children to learn, and those who use it in a deterministic way to make people adjust all the better to the status quo. What Crowther said in 1969 is not so far from expressing the reality of the rear-guard action.

We try to educate girls into becoming imitation men, and as a result we are wasting and frustrating their qualities of womanhood at great expense to the community.

He was right in identifying the values inherent in educational achievement as conflicting with the female role. Those girls who achieve success in this situation may feel themselves forced to imitate men and acquire their characteristics. But he uses this not as an argument for changing and eliminating roles to remove this conflict but as a justification for women only being encouraged to concentrate on their 'natural' role. Margaret Thatcher, when she was Secretary of State for Education posed this even more explicitly when, in answer to a letter from the NUT, when

she expressed the opinion that:

The role of the education service is to reflect rather than to lead society in that its major task is to prepare its citizens to take their place in it.

A more sophisticated version of the same argument is that used by Sally Oppenheim, Conservative MP and co-sponsor of the Tory Anti Discrimination Bill in 1973, who sees the sex roles as complementary. Demanding legal equality and expressing the need to change attitudes and prejudices, whilst at the same time refusing to attack the sex roles underlying them:

Every woman wants to overcome discrimination, wants equality of opportunity in jobs and training in education and under the law, but not every woman wants fundamental change of role.

A recent newcomer to this controversy is Corinne Hutt's book *Male and Female* (Penguin) which uses evolutionary theory based on animal evidence to prove that characteristics are biologically determined. In marked contrast to this camp is the statement made recently by the education officer of ILEA, one of the leading progressive education authorities (though fraught with contradictions) who links under-achievement of girls to their traditional sex role stereotyping, and suggests possible measures to combat these attitudes by broadening the concept of women in society, campaigning to change books, encouraging better careers advice for girls and informing teachers in training colleges. All of these ideas, if put into practice, can contribute to changing the consciousness of girls. Teacher and parent attitudes would also have to be changed to match the philosophy of these reforms.

Schools who do resist pressures to act as agents for the status quo, rubber stamping prevailing oppressive ideas and attitudes enabling children to fit all the more exactly into the correct social and occupational slot, but who, instead, insist on every child having the fullest opportunity for learning, provide, like the free schools, an important alternative model. Not enough in themselves to bring about fundamental change, for concepts of masculinity and femin-

ity underpin the economic structure, they can accompany struggles being fought on the economic level.

The original demand of the women's liberation movement for equal education and opportunity was prefixed by the following:

We don't just demand an education equally as bad as that of men, we want equal resources not equal repression, we want to fight for real education to make our own jobs and opportunities.

It is important to remind ourselves of this, for it acknowledges the fact that, within the education system, the possibility for either sex to develop and learn are limited. Within our schools, the success of some children is only achieved at the cost of rejecting and alienating others. Although boys are groomed for a dominant outgoing role and encouraged to have aspirations of success, their psyche is at the same time, damaged by being forbidden to acquire qualities such as tenderness and sensitivity. The demand questions what has in the past been a safety valve for those women who couldn't conform to the expected femininity, the possibility of becoming like men. It suggests an education of a qualitatively different kind. This demand, by no means short term, has implications that are far-reaching, that would seem to challenge the very way in which social relations are organised. In the meantime, we need to look at the demand and expand it with detailed plans for organising campaigns around specific issues it raises. These, in order to be successful, must be educative, focusing on a specific demand, e.g. provision of technical courses for girls, which people can identify with, and, taking them further, to explore the framework in which these limitations exist, i.e. the sexist ideology which underpins the economic system.

It means working to inform teachers likely to be affected and moved by discrepancies between girls' education and wider educational ideals, linking up with teachers concerned about education in relation to race and class yet not aware of sexism, making the Trade Union movement aware that their demand for equal pay is linked intrinsically both to

the education opportunities girls have and their wider conditioning into male and female roles. Hardest of all, because they usually tend to defend authoritarian methods and be suspicious of progressive innovation in education, is to get parents interested in campaigning around the issues this raises and raise their expectations of their own female children.

Maria Loftus
1974

An amended version of an article which was first published in RED RAG No. 7



Sex Roles in Children's Literature

Liberal minded teachers, librarians and writers recently became aware that children's books reflected a one-sided view of life, that of the well-to-do middle classes. All children in books were well educated and played out their adventures against a background of parental understanding and concern. Few, if any, adventures happened to working class children. It became a cause for concern that there were so few stories in which the working class child could see itself depicted and it was realised that this might be one reason why working class children do not read very much. If the working class child was a determined reader and overcame the problem of identification, he/she soon realised that the world of significant people, that is, people who do exciting things and influence events, did not include him/her. The bright child who could read absorbed his his/her lesson about his/her place in society.

The same people who awoke to ~~the~~ fact that the working class child would feel discriminated against in his/her reading were blind to the fact that there is another large section of child readers who are alienated by the mainstream of children's fiction. Girls find that there are very few books where girls play a crucial and satisfying part.

Small girls are no different from small boys. They like to get dirty, play rough games, climb trees, scrap, run, jump, and swim, and they like to read satisfying stories about kids like themselves having adventures. Adventures can either be of a fantastical kind, or simply about children getting deeply involved in a new experience. The child's involvement and positive action are really more important than the scale of the adventure. The plot could be a trip to

Jupiter or a quarrel with the people next door. Whatever the adventure, children can identify totally, and extend their own experience into the realm of their choice.

Choice for girls is limited. Children's books comprise boys' books, girls' books, and books supposedly meant for both sexes, but the latter, I suspect, are largely read by girls. Both boys' books and girls' books emphasise the polarity of the sexes but boys' books at least satisfy children's need for adventure, while books for girls tend to suppress it. Many women I know remember the hunt for suitable heroines to identify with. We longed for books about women pilots, women divers, women explorers, climbers and space travellers, or even about girls who were unrepentantly naughty and rebellious. It wasn't that we couldn't identify with boys in stories, we just wanted to be reassured that we were not to be excluded from the world of action. We ended up reading Biggles and William and like other girls, we soon got the message that the people who have the adventures and scope to determine the course of their own lives, are men.

In exactly the same way that the working class child absorbs the lesson about his/her place in society from his/her reading, the girl reader learns lessons about the role she will play as a woman. Before they reach their teens, many girls rebel against the feminine role they see ahead of them. (I am talking from my own experience and from that of numerous friends). They see no evidence in play or at school that they are less equipped for an exciting and active life than boys. Some are as strong physically and many are at that stage more advanced at school, and yet they are learning all the time that a woman's role is to be an adjunct to a man's life.

Stories for girls show no sympathy with the conflict between the developing awareness of self and the experience of the female role which goes on in many younger girls. Girls and boys in books behave in ways which are stereotyped according to adult concepts of male and female behaviour. Sex roles are rigidly emphasised, denying a child's feeling that she is a person in her own right, indep-

endent of sex.

Polarity of the sexes

The worst offenders in role preparation are books exclusively for boys or girls. Both stress the polarity of the sexes and exaggerate the sexual stereotypes. Girls books are, however, more inhibiting to the development of the child's imagination than are books meant for boys. Boys' adventures take place in all-male societies of motor racing circuits, the services, cargo boats etc. The selection I looked at were about smuggling, rallying, motor racing and trapping. The stories roved all over Europe, America, Northern Canada, and the China Seas. Extraordinary feats of physical endurance and skill were involved and the resources of the hero were stretched to the limit. One thing common to them all was the hero's high degree of technical competence in his particular field - the technicalities of motor cars, explosives or traps were all described in detail, and the adventures, though hair-raising enough to be satisfying, were based on a firm grasp of real life.

Books especially for girls are set in predominantly female societies like schools, pony clubs, ballet school, and among secretaries, nurses or air hostesses. Adventures are reduced to a kind of social extravaganza. In a school setting, this could be the achievement of Angela Brazil's 'Sunshine of popularity', by the proper exercise of feminine qualities. In the more sophisticated stories for older girls, the aims are social success in the adult world and the capture of the inevitable husband. Lorna Hill has written a whole string of books about different girls at Sadlers Wells. Dance, however, plays a minor part in the stories, which are concerned with the social lives of the characters. There are illustrations of the girls doing various ballet steps, but no real sense is given of the rigorous life a dancer leads, and the technical detail, so emphasised in boys' books, is studiously avoided. The difficulties are entirely in adapting to the rarefied world of balletomanes. Other 'girls only' books describe the girls overcoming their desires for ad-

venture and feelings of rebellion (described as their capriciousness and wilfulness) and transforming them into acceptable feminine qualities, like inner strength and imagination. Remember Jo in *Little Women* and Katy in *What Katy Did*. Another common plot tells how the girl heroine overcomes the motiveless malice of another girl. These female lagoes appear surprisingly frequently and encourage the belief, subscribed to by women themselves, that there is a suspect quality in all women.

Current booklists promoted by publishers 'for girls' show a preponderance of books about love, dating and romance, with a sideline in problems, like spots, glasses and so on, which interfere with romance. Dating is a teenage and sub-teenage preoccupation, and should be considered in children's books, and so should the physical problems which manifest themselves in the teens. However, the implication in these books is that romance is the purpose of a girl's life, and problems exist insofar as they hinder romance. Boys are interested in dating too, but they are not expected to read books about it. It is a minor part of their lives. Girls are not allowed the comforting assumption that sex and dating need play only a part in their lives. They read that it is of crucial importance, and learn to think about very little else. Dating literature is habit forming - I remember from my own teens reading quantities of the stuff to find the recipe for dindng a man.

Out of date ideas about woman's capabilities

Career books absolutely reinforce the traditional, out of date ideas about woman's capabilities. Bodley Head concede that girls can be air hostesses, beauticians, fashion buyers, journalists, farmers, library assistants, policewomen, teachers, almoners, booksellers, dental assistants and therapists. They may play a part in the processes of publishing, television, advertising and broadcasting. Other publishers have similar lists. Why are there women almoners, nurses and therapists in hospitals, but no doctors? Why is Sheila a dental assistant but not a dentist, when these jobs are done by many

women? Juliet in publishing turned out to be a secretary to a publisher, and left to get married. Joan on the farm became a herds woman, and left to get married. Jane, young authoress and failed doctor, did not succeed in getting anything published. The following quotations are typical:

A girl confident that with A certificate typing, her ugly mug would not impede her career - Juliet in Publishing.

Daddy: I know it's a bit of a bore, but shorthand typing never comes amiss - and later

Julian: I think it would be silly of you to give up this job of yours. Obviously you like it. It's going to get you out and about all over the world and teach you to stand confidently on your own two feet. But maybe in say four years time you might feel that you've got all you can get out of being a ship's officer and that a home of your own might be a good idea? - Hester, Ship's Officer.

Broadly speaking, books for boys extend the child's desire for adventure and involve him closely with the technical aspects of the development of the plot. Girls' books minimise adventure to social play acting and skate over the technicalities of adult life, clouding them in romance. I think that the great popularity of the school story must lie in the fact that the girl heroine is allowed considerable scope for adventure and rebellion against authority. There are no men present, indeed, within the terms of reference of the story, men hardly exist, except in very menial capacity of gardeners and grooms. There is no need therefore to inhibit the girls to maintain a standard of femininity. Even in school stories however, the girl does not rebel for the sake of rebelling, or because she questions the authority imposed upon her. It is always revealed that she was acting to uphold the honour of the school.

The solution is to 'fall in love'

A book which combines most of the topics of 'special interest to girls' is *Potrait of Margarita* by Ruth M. Ar-

thur, (Gollancz 1968). This book purports to tackle the colour problem. Margarita, a young coloured girl, is living at boarding school when she is given the news that her parents have been killed, and she is sent to live in a village in the country. John, her guardian, is a brilliant, handsome, enigmatic lawyer, and Margarita falls in love with him. Anonymous notes warn her to leave the village and threaten her life. At first Margarita assumes that the villagers will not tolerate a coloured girl in their midst, but it turns out that the writer of the notes is an old woman who nursed John. Finally, the old lady tries to kill Margarita, but herself falls victim to her own trap. John takes Margarita abroad to solve her problems, and she falls in love with a young fisherman, who is really a student of architecture with a brilliant future.

At the beginning of the book, Margarita has real problems. She has to adjust to the fact of her parents' death and adapt herself to life without them, and she has to establish her relationship, as a coloured girl, with her new surroundings. The solution she finds to both problems is to 'fall in love' with John, who is conveniently available as father figure, comforter and male ideal. The facts of the case may be psychologically realistic, but the writer does not show any attempt to come to terms with Margarita's problems on a realistic level. Her feelings about her parents' death are only mentioned twice, and her other problems are glossed over. Margarita makes no attempt to come to terms with her problems herself, her big decisions are made by John. Her second love affair is both a new way to evade present problems and a solution to those of the future. This affair is horrifying in itself in that this child who has not yet even finished school with almost no experience of life, is willing to see her future finalised in the form of this young prince/fisherman with a fat bank balance in his glass slipper. The final objection is to the old nanny, who is sharply contrasted to lucky Margarita as the old woman who never found love, and who went mad when her only love object was threatened.

Traditional ideas about sex roles

Books especially for one sex blatantly reinforce traditional ideas about sex roles, but there is another group of books which purport to be for both girls and boys but which are, perhaps, more pernicious. This is the family or group adventure story. These books represent a supposedly balanced view of reality. Girls often play a crucial part in the adventure, but the leader and final decision maker is always a boy. The male and female roles are invariably stereotyped when it comes to physical prowess. Boys and girls of similar ages vary a great deal in physical accomplishment, but it is always the girl who jeopardises the safety of the gang by falling over a tree root, or by her strength giving out half way up a rope. And it is always a boy, not another girl who comes back and rescues her. Emotionally, too, girls are a liability in a group adventure. They may, like Anne, in *The Famous Five* be cry-babies who need constant encouragement from the others, or their impulsiveness may thwart the plans of the boy leader, or their extra sensitivity may allow them to sympathise with the other side too much. In all cases, girls become an extra hazard, an old man of the sea for the boys to deal with.

Even the best imaginative adventure stories maintain the traditional roles. In *The Shield Ring* by Rosemary Sutcliffe, the central character is a girl, Frytha, but through her we feel the experiences of a boy, Bjorn. Bjorn is always active, carving, making toy boats, while Frytha lies in the grass, watching. He is the talented one, a brave fighter and a gifted musician. The battle sequences are experienced by Bjorn, but made available to the reader through Frytha. Both children are refugees in the Viking camp, but while Frytha settles into her woman's round of duties, Bjorn maintains his apartness and separate identity finally taking Frytha away to make a new life on his terms. In all things Frytha passively follows Bjorn, but as she follows him into some really good adventures, it is one of the more satisfying books for girls to read. In the

last analysis, unfortunately, it maintains a traditional attitude to women.

From the Mixed up Files of Mrs. Basil Frankweiler is the story of a brother and sister who run away from home in a New York suburb, and go to live in the Metropolitan Museum. It is the girl's idea to run away and initially she organises the escapade, manipulating her little brother into accompanying her. Once the boy gets enthusiastic about the adventure, he takes over most of the organization. His sister cannot handle their modest sum of money. She wants to spend it on non-essentials like the laundromat, going to restaurants with waiters travelling in taxis. In short, her adventure is still in the realms of fantasy and it takes a boy to make it work practically. She is also upset by the fustiness of the four-poster bed they sleep in and insist that they take baths in the fountain in the museum. Once the boy has become concerned to make the escapade work, he determines a plan of action and insists they keep to it, while the girl is distracted by events as they arise. They behave in what are considered to be typically male and female ways.

In *The Hidden Road* by Leila Berg, Jeremy and Nicola, two oppressively middle class children, move to a new house in a secluded road, which represents paradise for both of them. The council move in with bulldozers and build council flats right next door. The whole family is shocked that their road could be violated. Nicola is especially affected as the privacy and exclusiveness of the road are identified with her own developing feelings of awareness about herself. Working class and middle class finally come together in a fight to bring a man to justice who crushed a child's trike with a car, and prejudices on both sides are demolished. Sex roles are rigidly adhered to on all levels. Nicola responds to the newcomers emotionally and from an entirely selfish point of view. Jeremy is sensible and acknowledges that people have to live somewhere. Nicola has great difficulty in coming to terms with the new people during the course of their action together. She sees them as noisy and crude and even assumes that working class

mothers don't know how to care for their children. It is Nicola's female emotionalism and self orientated approach which makes her behave in this way. Her brother's responses are rational. The adults who appear are old-fashioned by any standards. The working class flat is always full of the smell of home baking, and the middle class mum, when not baking herself, spends the afternoons sorting through the family sheets for possible holes, then prevails upon Nicola to help her fold them and put them back. Both mothers are cuddly secure figures and fathers appear briefly to dispense wisdom and get things organised.

A stereotype has already emerged from the last two examples mentioned; that of the girl who reacts in an emotional and impulsive way and who is restrained by the common sense of her little brother.

Media image of happy families

The books I have described above, which were chosen completely at random, maintain established sexual roles rather than reinforcing them. Career books and one-sex only books operate a harder sell, providing girls with an image of their future lives which reflects the general media image of happy families seen in the commercials. Mother is happily engaged in keeping the home spic and span, father appears in the evening, smoking his pipe, and the kids are clean and charming, if a bit boisterous. We all recognise the falseness of the world of commercials, because we know that they are trying to put one over on us, to sell us something. Books of fiction should have no interest in selling an image, but the media world is immediately recognisable in teenage romances and other books. Marriage and family life is an area in which there are no problems. The problems in the stories are about getting married, and looking right in order to get married. The popularity of the dream world of *Valentine*, *Jackie* and *Marilyn* has been recognised by the publishers. Saleability is the prime motive. The good imaginative book, on the other hand, combine a genuine reflection of what the writer sees as the actual situation, with a shrewd idea

of what will sell.

Some writers may wish to make their girl characters more positive, departing from the formula slightly, but feel that this would alienate their possible boy readers as girls will tolerate a boy hero but few boys will read books with girl heroines. I feel that this picture of the market is probably accurate, and few boys would want to read about girls having adventures. The conclusion I would draw from this is that the male role, like the female role, is a source of doubt and insecurity to kids, who cannot take a flexible attitude. Writers are right to feel that they cannot hope to challenge the sex roles and sell their work. Children are going through a difficult period of adjustment to sexual roles, and do not wish to read books which challenge areas of behaviour which they have been led to believe are of supreme importance.

Most writers of books read by girls are women, who are writing about society as they experience it and as they think their readers want to see it. Many of them may have rebelled against their femininity when children, but must have come to some sort of terms with it in adult life in order to survive. Feelings of rebellion, once despatched, are seen as undesirable, and the writers' work reflects their successful coming to terms with their problems.

An interesting concession to young girls' rebellion is the tom-boy. She appears in the younger age range, where little girls are still unsure about accepting female status, and do many of the same things that little boys do, like playing rough games and climbing trees. Tom-boys are allowed to play a prominent part in an adventure, even to take over leadership for part of the time, to be tough, resourceful, and to make decisions. They also openly attack the female role that outside people like parents, and relations, expect them to play. George, in *The Famous Five* is openly scornful of the idea that girls are in any way weaker than boys. Nancy in *Swallows and Amazons* fiercely defends a girl's ability and right to do anything a boy can do. Unfortunately, a tom-boy's scorn for the trappings

of femininity extends to girls themselves. George treats Anne in exactly the same way as boys do, patronising her weakness and kindly looking after her. Anne maintains the feminine ideal, while George is considered as a boy. Peggy and Susan in *Swallows and Amazons* spend their time in the galley being good girls, allowing Captain Nancy to have her aberrations. The tom-boy seems to be a kind of safety valve for girls who are unsure of their role. She allows free reign to their fantasies of adventure, but, at the same time, she is sternly contrasted with the real girls. She is allowed no concessions to femaleness, dressing, acting and looking like a boy, and while she herself will not accept the fact that she is a girl, she is not totally accepted by the boys. Her world is ultimately unsatisfactory. Perhaps it is better after all to be a real girl.

It is interesting to note that the roles are never reversed the other way. Arthur Ransome never puts John and Roger in the galley.

It will be argued that many of the books I criticise merely represent society as it is. This is true. But I am writing from a point of view which is critical of the way society is, particularly in its attitude to women. While it is representative and safe to write books showing women in traditional passive roles, books of this sort show no encouragement to girls who have not yet totally accepted second class citizenship. One of the many reasons that girls accept their passive, secondary sex role is because they are not exposed to the idea that they can be anything else. Though it is unrepresentative to write a book called *Jill, Test Pilot* Jill will never think of becoming a test pilot until someone writes such a book. In the same way that the working class child learns from his reading that the world of significant people is made up from the middle classes, so the girl sees that the significant people are men. The working class child may be spurred on to reject his class and rise in the world, but no girl can aspire to change her sex.

Sexual stereotyping

It is not feasible or desirable to ask that children's fiction be in the vanguard of revolutionary change in society's attitude to sexual stereotyping. It is a far too sensitive area to start pushing propaganda - but this is exactly what we have been doing so far - pushing the idea of female subordination through children's stories to the confusion of little girls who are trying to come to terms with roles for which they see themselves destined, but for which they feel themselves unsuited. Nobody wants to replace dominant men in literature with dominant women. That would simply be substituting one stereotype for another. We simply want to see books where boys and girls behave as people, not according to pre-set patterns, which have no relevance to the way children feel when they read the books. The concepts of male and female behaviour are adult ones and are sources of insecurity to all children, and frustration to girls, as the female role is more restricting.

I think a change of attitude in kids' stories will only follow a change in attitudes in society unless some feminist women start writing books. One thing that can be done, however, and is being done, is to compile lists of kids' books which do not stick to the adult pattern and which show kids as people. They are not necessarily recently written books, or books written in a modern context. In fact, older fiction escapes the media image of women, and often makes an honest attempt to deal with the problems faced by girls. Outside Georgette Heyer, people in historical settings do not have to behave in prescribed ways any more than they do today. Joan Aiken's *Dido Twite*, Helen Cresswell's *Gravella Roller* and Rosemary Sutcliffe's *King's Daughter* exist at different times in the past and are in no way restricted by being female. The word has no significance for them except as a physical description.

Characters in adult fiction are not necessarily restricted by sex. It is something which seems prevalent in children's stories and it is difficult to escape the idea of a sell. The

way out must be to create an awareness that kids in stories are nearly always stereotyped according to sex, but to point out that this need not necessarily be so, by using illustrations from authors who have consciously or unconsciously avoided the trap.

Cammilla Nightingale
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By Moll



The Ideology of Sex Differences

The conventional ideology of sex roles puts emphasis on sex differences, not similarities; it fails to say 'there are some similarities and some differences' but says instead 'there are differences'. Two aspects of the arguments are interesting; first of all, it is couched in terms of the female's inferiority to the male ('women are different from men' not 'men are different from women') and, secondly, the supposed biological facts dragged in to support it are a perfect reflection of (male-dominated) social reality. In terms of the politics of women's liberation, it is necessary to look at the evidence on the biological and cultural basis of sex roles. The argument that biology determines important social differences between female and male roles has to be refuted.

The argument in favour of sex differences begins with a citation of the 'obvious' distinctions between female and male - differences in genitalia and the related fact that women and not men bear children. On the first of these - genital differences - the evidence is twisted to suit the argument. It is a case of men being different from women rather than the converse; maleness is brought about by the production of male hormones in the foetus. Thus the basic human form is female, and biological maleness is something added. The biblical myth in which Eve is created out of Adam is mistaken; biologically speaking, Adam is made out of Eve.

Rather than there being clear distinctions between the sexes, the groundplan of female and male bodies is identical. This means that, for example, every normal

man has a womb and a clitoris. The male womb, ('uterus masculinus'), is a collection of vestigial tissue which usually only draws attention to itself in old age when it is often the cause of prostate trouble. With the decrease in male hormones which occurs with age, the vestigial womb increases in size, blocks the bladder outlet, and demands surgical intervention. The male's clitoris is his penis; this way of putting it is simply to reverse the conventional order of precedence, in which women are assured that they are 'just as good' as men because their clitoris is really a penis. The clitoris is a socially inferior organ, its lack of prestige deriving from the inferior stereotype of woman. Yet another reason why men are not told they have a clitoris has to do with size. The intrinsically superior value of greater size is one of the male oriented values which runs all the way through the debate about sex differences. In the genital context, a pre-occupation with the size of the penis is a common theme in pornographic literature and in masculine psychology generally. Perhaps it is interesting that the human clitoris was only measured for the first time forty years ago.

However, it is not the area of sexual response, but rather that of reproductive capacity from which the argument about sex differences derives so much of its 'evidence'. The fact that women have children and must endure the associated processes of menstruation, gestation and lactation, is held to be reason for multiple forms of discrimination against them. This is a convoluted, culture-bound argument. Different cultures define parenthood in different ways; modern industrial societies are unusual in attaching a great deal of importance to *social* motherhood, and the traditional argument about sex differences reflects this pre-occupation. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to find a non-industrial society which lays so much stress on the one-to-one mother-child relationship, and in which women are as tightly bound to their children in an emotional/psychological sense as they are

in industrial cultures today. But in small-scale societies, women do not have the relief from constant child-bearing and breast feeding which contraception and the feeding bottle offer. The paradox is that cultures are so much more closely caught in the web of biological processes than we are, yet they are free from the ideology of motherhood which restricts women in our culture, and which is reflected in the traditional male-oriented argument in favour of natural differences between the sexes.

In Alor, a small island between Java and New Guinea, women carry the kind of economic responsibility which is common in small-scale societies throughout the world; they are agriculturalists and are responsible for the basic daily supply of community foodstuffs. They work in the fields throughout pregnancy and there is no idea that physical exertion is bad for pregnant women. It is only 'bad' in societies which view pregnancy as some kind of pseudo-pathological process. Most small-scale societies do not in fact ban physical exertion during pregnancy, lactation or early motherhood, so the Alorians are fairly typical in this respect. A week or ten days following the birth, the Alorian woman returns to regular field work, leaving the infant in the village to be cared for by its father, an older brother or sister, a grandmother or other relative. The mother breastfeeds the child when her work permits, but other women also breast feed it. It is not thought peculiar for a baby to be breast fed by someone other than its biological mother; every baby is fed by a number of women, and breast feeding is commonly continued until the child is two or three years old. This 'communal lactation' is not confined to Alorian society, but has been reported by many anthropologists studying a range of different cultures.

It is perfectly possible, in other words, to have a society which reproduces itself effectively and in which babies are fed on human milk, but in which the division of labour does not follow the woman-housewife

and man-provider model. Biology itself is flexible, and does not 'determine' any particular version of the social role of mother. To argue that women's capacity for motherhood is an obstacle to their participation in a world outside the home is a spurious argument, based on the prescription that the proper place for women is the home. Many of the disabilities from which women suffer in modern industrial society, such as post-natal and pre-menstrual depression, painful periods and so on, are unheard of in small-scale societies. This is not to say that such syndromes are not very real for many women who experience them in our society today: they are. But they are not biologically inevitable.

The same biological flexibility that is found in cultural notions of parenthood is found in the area of personality and temperament. In the ideology of sex differences propounded, a whole range of behavioural differences between the sexes is attributed to biology. Since the pattern of behavioural sex roles is very different in other cultures, the influence of biology here has to be questioned. The hysterical, emotional, sensitive and intuitive nature of the feminine stereotype in western culture belongs to the man in Iran (a notably patriarchal society); women are expected to be the practical, cool and calculating sex. Among the Tchambuli of New Guinea, the intelligence and enterprise of the female far outweigh those of the male, who lacks the ability to concentrate, is introspective, and cannot come to grips with anything. In many societies, women are said to be stronger than men, so they carry the heavy loads and do all the strenuous work: physical exertion is a 'feminine' activity. In Anglo-Saxon times, within western culture, women were self-assertive, and independent, and one writer said of France at the time of the crusades:

Men had the right to dissolve in tears, and women that of talking without prudery...If we look at their intellectual level, the women appear distinctly superior.

They are more serious: more subtle. With them we do not seem to be dealing with the rude state of civilisation that their husbands belong to....As a rule, women seem to have the habit of weighing their acts; of not yielding to momentary impressions.

These are only a few, isolated examples. But they serve to illustrate the kind of flexibility that the ideology of sex differences does not take into account; they serve to confirm the proposition that the power this ideology accords to biology in the shaping of sex roles simply mirrors the norms of our own culture.

Any field in which sex differences/similarities are examined is likely to reflect these social norms. Thus, in the area of intelligence, sex differences are found in a number of abilities. Females excel in verbal ability especially early in life. This is often explained with reference to the close tie between female parent and female child, but the cultural stereotype is generally one of verbal fluency in females. In mathematical ability, there appear to be no early sex differences, but after eleven the male's ability to perform well on tests of arithmetical reasoning becomes consistent and marked. On the criterion of analytical ability, males seem to perform better. One test which asks children to think of ways in which toys could be improved obtains the following results; up to about seven, children of both sexes score better on toys appropriate to their own sex; after this age, boys are able to think of more ways of improving both feminine and masculine toys. The masculine image is one which emphasises activity, exteriority and constructive activities (compared with the feminine one which is focussed on the home). Thus the male's conditioning exposes him to an outward-looking, rather than inward-looking perspective.

None of these differences in intellectual ability has been established outside the western cultural context. Observations of anthropologists studying other cultures would strongly suggest that they are culturally and

not biologically determined. The influence of culture can be very easily discerned within our own society. Many studies show a stronger relationship between measured IQ and achievement for boys than for girls. One follow-up study of gifted children demonstrated a close relationship between IQ and occupational level for men, but virtually no relationship for women: both men and women in this sample had started in the same high IQ range as children. The occupations of the women were undistinguished: two thirds of those with IQ's of 170 or more were housewives or office workers. Females thus seem to be particularly prone to under-achievement in relation to their measured IQ.

Female under-achievement begins at puberty, at a time when the pressure on girls to 'act feminine' suddenly accelerate. The cultural standard in female-male relationships is that the female should not be as assertively intelligent as the male. This is the stereotype which girls confront. Since the life chances of women are so strongly affected by their relationship to men, it is easy to see how many girls may choose a traditional feminine role at this time, rather than the pursuit of more self-oriented intellectual goals.

In the argument for sex differences, a great deal of importance is attached to aggression. Indeed, aggression has become the main quality used in defining masculine and feminine behaviour. As one might expect, its converse - passivity - is hardly discussed at all. Instead of it being said that men lack passivity, it is said that women lack aggression; while one quality - the masculine one - is positively valued, the other has a negative value. Like size and strength, aggression is a key masculine value. What is the biological evidence here?

Male hormones injected into animals make them more aggressive. When two male mice meet, they usually fight, but females and castrated males do not. Animal experiments have suggested that hormones may have a pervasive effect on behaviour because they cause some

kind of sex-differentiation in brain patterns in the period before or shortly after birth (dependent on species). It is not known how far this is applicable to humans, but certainly the relationship between hormone levels and behaviour is a complex one. The whole business of generalising from animals to humans is dangerous. Two experts have said:

In view of the enormous dependence of the human species on learning processes, it seems quite unlikely that the early exposure of hypothalamic [brain] cells to androgen [the male hormone] would establish fixed, complex patterns of aggressive behaviour for a lifetime.

The process would be much more subtle than that. However, this issue remains hypothetical, until a great deal more is known.

There is strong evidence that much of the male's aggression in society today is a result of cultural, not biological, influences. An interesting survey was conducted by an American research institute on 45 females and 44 males over a period of about 20 years. Researchers found that the male's adult aggression could be predicted from his aggression record in childhood, and the same was true of the female's passivity. But the passivity of boys and the aggression of girls in childhood bore no such relationship to their adult behaviour: the effect of social conditioning was to reduce sex-inappropriate behaviour. Passivity in boys is frowned upon and discouraged: so is aggression in girls. Another American study, this time of child-rearing patterns in 379 families, found the greatest and most consistent difference in parental behaviour towards boys and girls in the area of aggression. Boys were allowed far more aggression in relationships with other children than were girls. If a girl behaved aggressively towards her parents she was likely to be punished; a boy had a greater licence. To be a real boy meant fighting back, but femininity consisted in a non-retaliatory attitude. Moreover, the punishment of boys was

likely to take the form of physical aggression - an activity often left by the mother for the father when he came home. In contrast, girls tended to be punished by the withdrawal of love.

To talk about sex differences or similarities in passive and aggressive behaviour is, of course, silently to concur with the appropriateness of these categories. The ideology of sex differences *does* hold up female/male categories as dichotomous, black-and-white (perhaps a relevant turn of phrase here), as mutually exclusive. In reality they are not. Virtually every sex 'difference' that is discussed is not a dichotomous classification. Thus there are many girls who play with cars and trains, many boys who play with dolls (given the chance); there are women who are good mathematicians and bad cooks, men who are hopelessly impractical and given to bouts of 'feminine' hysteria. Patterns of IQ scores show some sex variation, but the majority of all female and male individuals fall in to the same group, and so on.

This lack of polarity even extends to biological sex categories themselves. Experts studying inter-sexuality have said that in the end it is impossible to define femaleness and maleness; they are merely ends of a continuum.

So far as aggression is concerned, therefore, some males are passive, some females aggressive. The sex difference, even for those people socialised into very traditional sex roles, is not one of discontinuous grouping. Coming back to the issue of male bias, it should be noted that the aggression to which so much importance is accorded is *physical* aggression. This is rarely stated, because it is implicit in the whole tone of the argument. But another sort of aggression - verbal aggression - is a female speciality. Girls display a lot of 'prosocial' aggression - they are fond of stating rules together with threats of punishment for breaking them. Much of the sex difference in aggression is manifest rather than latent. Females feel more

guilt and conflict over their own aggressive behaviour than males; this is because the female's sex role training includes an inhibition of aggressive behaviour which in turn is liable to induce anxiety and guilt. Differences of this kind are clearly cultural, not biological, since females would not have problems with aggression, were they 'naturally' unaggressive people.

In a society which brings up the sexes differently, to different complexes of expectation and reward, female and male are bound to be different to some extent. This is a truism which the ideology of sex differences conveniently ignores.

Sex differences created by early conditioning permeate many patterns of adult behaviour. Crime statistics and social stereotypes of criminal behaviour are one of the areas in which the different upbringing and situations of the sexes reveal themselves. The most typical female crime is shoplifting. The majority of offences are for stealing low-value items; the typical shop-lifter is not only female, but likely to be over 40 and suffering from some kind of difficulty or stress. Shoplifting is a female crime not because women are naturally predisposed to this kind of behaviour, but because the stealing of food, clothes etc. is a response to stress that 'fits' with other qualities of the feminine role. In a sex-differentiated society people on the whole want to excel not as people, but as men or women, and when they deviate from 'normal' behaviour, they want to deviate in specifically feminine and masculine ways. Hence the criminal ethic of aggressive masculinity; boys brought up to equate maleness with acts of aggression and violence are exposed to a situation in which criminality is a perpetual possibility.

Many sex differences can be traced back to the sex-discriminatory nature of the modern family, which is probably the most powerful force acting to conserve traditional sex role patterns. Not only is it obvious that parents behave differently towards female and male children, but it is known that they do so even towards

very tiny babies. The male child is treated with a respect for his autonomy and independence which is not afforded to female children. Mothers have a tendency to transmit their own socially conditioned lack of confidence to daughters; fathers may evoke in sons the same brash self-assertiveness that they were brought up to believe was the sign of a 'real' man. In these respects parents are behaving as the (usually unaware) agents of culture-transmission; they themselves are the perpetuators of sex polarity.

Particular social differences between the sexes are also traceable to the family, and to the maternal system of child rearing. Thirty years ago it was noted that the male children of over-protective, dependency-encouraging mothers resembled females in school achievement and intellectual ability. These boys had not made the break between mother-identification and father-identification which is necessary for the inculcation of traditional masculinity. In the field of sex differences in intelligence, one tendency that has been described is the lesser ability of the female to 'break set' or to re-structure a problem. (Commenting on the male bias in the sex differences argument becomes monotonous, but why is it not said that males have lesser ability to stay within the context of a problem?) It has been suggested that the male's need to change from an identification with mother to an identification with father is the reason why he finds it easier to break set, whereas the female does not acquire this ability because she continues to model herself on her mother. This interpretation certainly makes sense.

A recurrent problem in discussion about the biological and/or cultural origins of female and male roles is a confusion between 'sex' and 'gender'. Sex is the biological classification 'female' and 'male', while gender refers to the cultural feminine and masculine identity which individuals acquire. Convincing evidence that sex and gender do not always overlap comes from the study of individuals who have some physiological sex

- anomaly. Some of these people are of one chromosomal sex, but are given by their parents the label of the opposite gender, through an ambiguous physical appearance. Thus 'boys' become 'girls' and vice versa. Robert Stoller, a psychoanalyst who has made a particular study of gender identity problems in such people, recounts various fascinating case-histories. In one, a biological female was reared as a male, believed herself to be thoroughly masculine and played the male role as effectively as any normal man. 'She' was spectacularly successful as a lover; with the help of an artificial penis she was capable of intercourse, and one girl she made love to accused 'her' of getting her pregnant. Another of Stoller's patients was biologically neuter, but her gender identity was feminine and she sought medical help when her breasts fail to develop and menstruation had not started. Her external genitals were female, but she had no womb, ovaries or vagina. She had been brought up as a normal female, and was as feminine in appearance, interests, personality and behaviour as other girls of her age in Southern California. Like other girls she wanted marriage and motherhood. Her sister said of her:

She had a doll that she got when she was eight, and she always said that she was going to save it to give to her little girl after she got married. She still has that doll and it's in perfect condition...She was nine years old when my son was born and she always loved to take care of him and was very, very good at handling him....You can't kid her about not having children.

The patient was told she could have a vagina surgically constructed, but her parents opposed this. They felt it would lead to promiscuity - although, of course, they knew she could never get pregnant. These reactions illustrate how 'normal' the parents' treatment of their 'daughter' was - femininity to them, as for most parents, entailed the repression of sexuality.

In a large series of hermaphroditic patients, 95% of

the cases were ones in which the sex of rearing (rather than biological sex) corresponded with gender identity. If brought up as a girl, the individual felt feminine; if reared as a boy, 'he' felt himself to be male. Gender identity is established early - primarily in the first two years of life - and is usually irreversible. Even in cases where sex of rearing and gender identity contradict biological sex, it is less psychologically traumatic to change the individual's biological sex than to alter 'her' or 'his' gender identity.

Most of the arguments about the naturalness of sex differences collapse under the weight of this kind of evidence; cross-cultural data on female and male roles fails to support them, and all, certainly, are discredited from a feminist point of view when the bias of masculine values is uncovered. There is also the question of relevance. Whatever their biological make-up, women are socially oppressed in a multitude of ways. The issue of biological sex-differentiation is simply not relevant to the question of social, economic or political oppression.

Ann Oakley
1973



The Pattern of Tiny Contradictions

Child care is and always has been a central issue for the women's liberation movement. The liberation of women is inseparable from, among many other things, the development of different ways of caring for and relating to children.

Considering the centrality of the issue, attention given to it has been both incidental and underdeveloped with few exceptions. Before attempting a description of one of the exceptions, the Children's Community Centre at 123 Dartmouth Park Hill, London N.19, I think it's necessary to examine the dominant features which influenced the formulation of the first women's liberation child-care demand for 24 hour nurseries for all, and to understand the difficulties involved in the campaign which followed and how its ultimate failure influenced the setting up of the Children's Community Centre (CCC).

A report presented to the National Conference of Labour Women in 1970 detailed the number of nursery schools and classes, admitting that in 1967 nursery education was available to only 6% of 3 - 4 year olds:

Some areas provide for as many as 20% while others as low as 1% or less.

1968-69: 26 of the 83 county boroughs and 18 of the county councils provided no nursery places. Large towns such as Grimsby, Rochdale, Doncaster and Darlington provide no places at all, neither do the county councils of Berkshire, Kent and the East and North Ridings of Yorkshire.

Most outstanding is the absence of a single local authority in Wales providing nursery places.

These statistics do not include day nurseries which are

run by Health rather than Education Authorities and which are therefore staffed by nursery nurses rather than teachers. They are open long hours and take children from 6 weeks old. But they are in similar short supply and, in the main, only cater for priority hardship cases.

However, despite the extreme national shortage expressed in the report, there was no public outcry! Not surprising in a society divided horizontally by classes and vertically by sex, each division subdivided into a multiplicity of races, religions, and occupations and each believing itself to be at odds with the rest.

Not the best situation for united action against injustice or exploitation, but super-efficient at reproducing the capitalist system whilst containing the most hair-raising contradictions and illogicalities for working class people, especially women. For example, we are penetrated with an ideology, with all its component parts, which says a woman's place is in the home looking after her husband and children. This ideology co-exists with a reality of 9 million women making up over one third of the workforce and being paid approximately half of the average national male wage.

The only logic for these apparent contradictions lies in the economic needs of the system which this duality specifically expresses.

Thirty years ago, during the last war, the dominant ideology made it desirable for women to leave their children in nurseries and join the workforce. The ideology of the late 60's, refined and cemented with pseudo-scientific evidence from Educationalists, Sociologists and the media, all nicely situated in the middle classes, clearly operated (and still does) to make women almost totally responsible for the pre-school care of their children.

Time and time again, TV and radio programmes and magazine articles discussed the 'deprivation' of 'latch-key' children whose mothers worked outside the home.

There was status attached to the family where the woman stayed at home; some men boasted of how they wouldn't let their wives work outside the home once they

were married or had kids.

John Bowlby had it all sown up. He was the authority of the day on infant deprivation and wrote that to avoid serious emotional disturbances the child must have a one-to-one relationship with its mother or mother substitute for the first few years of its life.

The flimsiness of his experiments has since been exposed and discredited (see *The Myth of Motherhood*, a pamphlet by Lee Comer (Spokesman) and *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed* by Michael Rutter (Penguin)).

When reality conflicted with the ideology, it was concluded, with blind consistency, that the mother was at fault. The Plowden Report openly stated its disinclination to persuade the Government of the day to provide nursery places for the children of mothers who were not economically obliged to work. So, expensive private nurseries, childminders or relatives filled the gap, depending on the economic status of the mother.

The Playgroups Association had been growing by leaps and bounds during this period and for very understandable reasons. Playgroups are run on voluntary help and therefore are of minimal cost to the government and local authorities. They are 100% motivated by the educational development of the child which is ideologically acceptable and, because they operate for such short hours, in no way 'threaten' the mother's role in the family.

Even the National Campaign for Nursery Education, in its concern for popular support, stuck firmly to a child-centred motivation.

When, in the late sixties, the Women's Liberation Movement burst onto the scene, it naturally approached child care problems with women in mind. The audacity of this simple step produced reactions of incomprehension and embarrassment (I'm not exaggerating). By 1970, the Women's Movement consisted of a collection of small but different organisations, the largest one being the Women's Liberation Workshop. These were linked by a quarterly meeting of representatives which was called the Women's National Co-

ordinating Committee. This committee was responsible for formulating the four demands of the women's movement which were

Equal Pay

Equal education and job opportunities

Free contraception and abortion on demand

24 hour nurseries for all under 5's

The WNCC had tried to work out a set of demands which touched broadly on all the points at which women experienced discrimination. The demand for 24 hour nurseries in common with the other demands, was intended to cover the immediate needs of the most hard hit women, including women night workers. It was saying, if we are to have nurseries for everyone they must be open around the clock. Unfortunately, the wording was ambiguous and many people took it to mean that the same children stayed there for 24 hours a day.

Socialised child care is a crucial concept for the women's movement and the left to introduce, but in the form of a demand isolated from the support of a total socialist system and simply plonked onto an alienating capitalist one, it created formidable contradictions, as we discovered when we tried to launch a national campaign around the demand. We could have overcome the problems of inexperience, lack of funds, family commitments, had other aspects been clearer. As it was, one of the main stumbling blocks was that the demand was quantitative and in no way qualitative, which meant we were simply asking for more of what already existed and, though serving its original purpose in covering the most hard hit women's immediate needs, it had very limited appeal for those with a remnant of choice, both in and out of the movement.

Women who were not in the movement frequently argued that all the problems of caring for children in the isolation of their own home were preferable to the daily grind of some rotten job, given that money wasn't the deciding factor. It was impossible to relinquish easily the only justification. But even where work was preferable, the

conspiracy of guilt, created often by other women, who had similarly been kept in their place, was hard to confront.

Women in women's liberation were confused, suspicious, uncertain. They didn't want nurseries for everyone if the nurseries remained hot beds of sexist ideology and authoritarian organisation. Support was impossible, action was impossible without a large well organised and powerful movement behind the campaign. Where would pressure come from to force the government to provide a service they already got for nothing.

It must be implicit in any campaign demand that it is achievable, in part at least. This wasn't! But, paradoxically, this was its sole positive feature; it served an ideological role in exposing that the simple notion of child care for all pre-supposed a multitude of other progressive changes in society before it was even conceivable.

So the Women's National Co-ordinating Committee's national campaign for 24 hour nurseries proved to be a non-starter, though many went grey in the process of not starting.

However, early in 1971 an opportunity presented itself to work in a completely different way. Not so majestic perhaps but a good deal more feasible. It was an opportunity to explore in a real way the viability, in a full time nursery situation, of all the concepts which were bandied about like non-sexist, non-authoritarian, collective child-care.

Some women's groups in Camden offered an idea to the council that short life property should be used as child-care centres run by women's liberation. Camden Council lived up to its liberal image and accepted the idea. It took 20 months negotiating before the first centre was opened on December 4th 1972 at 123 Dartmouth Park Hill in the redevelopment area of Highgate New Town.

Description of the house

The centre is in a four storey house facing directly onto

the street. There are two rooms on each floor with a back addition on the two lower floors. The open plan basement and minute back yard are the main play areas for paint, sand, water, clay and climbing, jumping, sliding. Toilets and washbasins are in the back addition. The main room on the ground floor which adjoins the kitchen is used for eating, reading and clean play. On the first floor, the largest room is an office used also as a children's rest room and, in the evenings, as a meeting room. Adjoining this is a smaller living room used so far by the part time worker in lieu of salary.

The upper floor is a flat for a woman and child so that the building is always occupied.

Money

The council gave a capital grant of £1,500 with which to equip the centre and an annual grant of £3,000 for all salaries and running costs. Out of this the parents employ a full-time qualified worker, a part-time worker and a daily cleaner. The only charges for the children are 10p per day which covers morning and afternoon snacks and lunch.

Staffing

Apart from the paid workers, all staffing consists of voluntary help, mainly from parents carefully organised on a rota system. There is a high ratio of staff to children, usually four, never less than three to fifteen kids. Most days there is extra help at lunch times and every day a very welcome person gives up her lunch hour to read stories to the children, allowing other people to have a break.

Selection

Twenty one children pass through the CCC in a day between 8.30 a.m. and 6.00 p.m., but only fifteen are present at any one time. The children fit broadly into three categories.

1) Seven are the kids of the 7 women who negotiated for the centre of whom 6 are teachers and work part-time and 1 is an ex-librarian. All these mothers give time at CCC- and in addition so do 3 of the fathers.

2) Five are the kids of women with full time jobs; a bar maid, an office worker, a student and a ground hostess for Ghana Airways.

3) The remaining 9 kids come from 6 sets of parents out of which 3 mothers give time at the centre. Their occupations are student, clerk and teacher. Out of those who give no time at the centre, the fathers' occupations are postman, house painter, and shopkeeper and the mothers' occupations are houseworker, houseworker and shopkeeper.

Months before opening we wrote to and visited all local families with children under five whose addresses we could get from the local Neighbourhood Advice Centre. We informed the local Tenants Association of our opening and invited applications for places.

Since opening we had so many applications for places we realised we had to have a very strict policy on selection. We have to limit our intake only to those in the greatest need from immediate streets. Definition of need is an on-going discussion which necessarily considers the needs of the parents as well as the needs of the child.

Journal

A daily journal has been kept since the opening of the centre where events and non-events are minutely re-corded. Everybody who works at the centre is encouraged, not always successfully, to summarise their daily experiences and impressions. This has several purposes; the very action of formulating one's thoughts in order to write them down gives a greater sense and understanding of what's happening. On a very practical level it is necessary that different people working each day can know the happenings of previous days. It is particularly important that the development of the children can be observed over long periods.

Men

During the 20 months preceding the centre opening, those women in the negotiating group who were members of women's liberation strongly resisted the inclusion of men in the group, on the grounds that if the centre were to operate in the interests of women, which was its reason for being, then the definitions and control must be kept in the hands of women during the formative stages. However, the same women felt equally strongly that it was in the interests of women that men should take an active and equal role in child-care. Therefore, as soon as the centre opened, efforts were made to involve male parents and helpers wherever possible.

There are now five men who work regularly at the centre, some of whom admit to extreme feelings of insecurity and awkwardness, in the early days, due to being a minority group in an occupation dominated by their opposite sex, in which they had little experience and therefore expertise.

Collectivity

If one had to isolate the most important single element at the centre, that element must be collective organising. It would probably be the slowest, hardest and least efficient form of organising in a time and motion study but that is not the criteria. The purpose is the development and strengthening of the people in the collective by gradually breaking down oppressive divisions and passing on each other's skills and knowledge. Theoretically, all have equal rights. In fact, due to unevenness of experience, some people are more vocal than others and consequently play a larger part in defining directions of the centre. It's necessary always to explain all references so as not to exclude people from the discussions which often go on for months. But the constant interchange of ideas, questions, criticisms means a very rapid and progressive development of the people involved.

It seems to be the only way to confront competition and egomania within a group, for collective organising pre-

supposes the value of and concern for each individual and this is important, especially for women who have been under-valued all their lives. But, even more simply, it is the only way we can hope to pass on to future parents at the centre all the ideas and aspirations we have for it.

Contrary to what many people think, non-authoritarian organising (if it is to work) means very careful, systematic organising and this is a characteristic which runs through every aspect of the centre. We find time and time again that lack of organisation is oppressive and disruptive and allows unfair dominance of some over others. This is true among the adults as it is among the children.

The meeting

The centre functions through a weekly meeting of the collective, where all decisions and organisational problems are thrashed out. It is the point of interaction between the centre and home, where parents can discuss how and what their children will learn. It's often hard to utilise this freedom after years of being prevented by the mystique and impermiability of institutions. The more parents feel at ease with ideas expressed at the CCC, the less chance of their children experiencing a double standard between the centre and home.

Tensions related to the meeting have arisen from some parents simply not attending. Many forms of persuasion have been tried as non-attendance is seen as a very serious problem for several reasons. It has been a growing area of resentment among parents who work at the centre and attend meetings to see other parents doing neither. Unless those who can't give time attend meetings there is no way that the centre can extend its knowledge of the child or communicate to the parents what it's about.

Without the meeting the centre is, in the experience of those parents, no different from any other nursery, and not least of its justifications for existence is that it should provoke awareness and development on all questions of child-care among everyone who is connected with it.

The collective is divided on how to deal with the very real problem of non-attendance of meetings. Some think attendance should be a pre-condition for having ones child at the centre. Others resist this, believing people should be persuaded rather than forced to attend. So the discussion goes on.

Practice

Anyone who has worked with numbers of small children knows that the wear and tear on ones psyche is tremendous and we were trying to organise the learning and exchange with the children in ways which were often uncharted.

Our early experiences of 'collective' child-care were pure torture for many of us. We were relating to children out of the privacy and protection of our own homes. Those of us with quite long experience in women's liberation realised with shame how little that had penetrated our daily relationship with our children. We were publicly exposed. We watched each other minutely; instinct was ridden with pitfalls. It took a collective situation to make us painfully aware of each expression of our continuing authoritarian sexism.

Many of us were in misery those first few months. What could we do? How could we change years of relating to children as a controller and server? We felt we had been caught with our knickers down and frequently we fled to the kitchen, an area of security, and got madly involved with the washing up. But as time went on a routine evolved and as habits changed things got less tense, though the level of criticism has heightened if anything.

The children

We are trying to break away from the traditional authoritarian mode of relating to children and are attempting to offer them as many choices as possible and as much independence as they can cope with. All activities are made available for children of both sexes but it's not enough simply to treat all the children equally. The boys have

frequently already learned their advantage and are quick to make capital out of it. There has to be positive support in favour of the girls, who are generally already less adventurous. So we go further and actively encourage the boys to do traditionally female activities like cooking and shopping and encourage the girls to use hammers and saws and to fight back when attacked. In doing so we hope to counter the rigid role definition our children are forced into by society and to give them the confidence to challenge it. At the centre the children sometimes see men cooking the lunch and women putting up shelves or changing plugs and hopefully the children will form less conventional images of men and women than those perpetrated elsewhere.

The Centre is carefully organised to allow the children to do things for themselves. All the toys and most art materials are kept on shelves at child height, so that the kids can help themselves to anything they want without having to ask a grown-up. A routine was devised for meal times, after an opening week of chaos, which allows them to serve themselves, pour their own drinks (and wipe up the spills!), clear away their dirty dishes and scrape the plates. At first we all lunged forward to heap food onto their plates and hovered around whilst they ate, but we are slowly learning to restrain ourselves from always doing things for them and are being continually surprised at how capable they are. Everything doesn't always run smoothly, but on the whole they respond to responsibility and seem to be thriving on it.

Whilst encouraging independence from adults we are also encouraging greater dependence on the peer group and suggest to the kids that they do things together and help one another. We don't want to breed competitive children always seeking adult approval and praise. The children often paint together on one long sheet of paper, they move the tables together ready for snacks, they help each other on and off with their coats and they comfort and hug each other. Slowly they are growing more sensitive to one another and are learning to work together. Like the adults,

they are finding out that things get easier when they are shared.

In choosing equipment for the children to use we have deliberately brought in many improvised materials. Large cardboard boxes and old drawers allow much more scope for imaginative play than most of the glossy, expensive and badly made toys in the shops and the children can take apart an old camera from a jumble sale and examine the bits without being told to 'stop because they're breaking it'. In providing them with real things to examine and play with, instead of always toys created by purely adult fantasy, we are allowing them to better understand the world around them. The basic activities mentioned earlier are always available, but in addition we organise other 'special' activities around a weekly theme, in order to maximise the number of different experiences we can offer the children. Themes we have had include living things, the senses, colour, shape, size and measurement, how things work, and printing. Having a theme helps to bring continuity from one day to the next for the children. It also makes us feel more secure when we work at the centre if we know that there are plenty of activities planned, as it is often hard to think of fresh activities on the spot. We go out with the children a great deal to try and relate what they experience at the centre with their knowledge of the world outside. The same local park can be used to illustrate several different things, perhaps colour one week and plants the next. Sometimes we take more ambitious trips to places like Kew Gardens or the Science Museum and create quite an amusing spectacle on public transport.

Our experience has led us to feel very positive about the use of a house as a child-care centre rather than a purpose-built institution. The size and distribution of the rooms is not so different from the children's homes and the function of each room is visible. Wherever possible the children are involved in everything that happens at the centre. The kitchen is not a magical, mystical place out of which ready cooked meals emerge at lunch time. Instead,

the children are in there grating cheese, cutting up fruit, making jelly or bread, not simply 'helping' or hindering, but being genuinely useful. Food doesn't just appear on the shelves, the children go out to buy it with an adult. The washing doesn't clean itself, the kids take it to laundrettes and learn about concepts of hot/cold, dry/wet in the process. The day at the centre may be a long one, but it is not often that anyone is bored.

Training Scheme

Our biggest problem at the moment is that many people at the centre find the work difficult and feel ill-equipped to cope in a creative way and we've realised that if we are to survive in the way we want to, then we must supply our own training scheme or learning situation for people who work at the centre. We have to implement a real course of study and exploration into the practicalities and theory of the sort of child-care we want to practice. Daily we have recognised the urgent need for this. Plans are in motion and it is at present our greatest priority.

Future struggles

Already out of the short experience of the centre, future struggles are predictable. First and foremost, to get an increase in our grant so that more people at the centre can get paid and ultimately everyone. Secondly, a working party is already forming to begin negotiations with the council for permanent re-housing, especially to include facilities for under two year olds, a most neglected group in terms of nursery provision. Also, to include a women's centre with facilities for overnight stay, a need we have been made very aware of since opening.

Relationship to community

Having short life property in re-development areas can be a source of antagonism with long-standing residents in that area, who see their locality being allowed to decay for many years before re-development actually happens. In High-

gate New Town some houses will have been empty for nine years before they are finally demolished. Shopkeepers flee the area and amenities generally decrease. With empty properties everywhere the area soon becomes rat-infested and filthy. The council fails completely to assess and supply the needs of people during this period, failing even to maintain repairs on council houses.

Bitter resentment is therefore levelled at transient groups, organisations and squatters who are seen to take advantage of this situation and in a real sense can represent permanent takeover of a working class area by the middle classes during redevelopment. In our case, there has been criticism on the grounds that we provide *free* child-care when the long term residents had to pay for their children's nursery education in the past. The reasoning is that they are now paying through the rates for us to have free child care and this is hard to take when on the one hand they are so neglected by the council and on the other it is seen that *some* parents could clearly afford to pay. However, it is conveniently ignored that other parents can clearly not afford to pay.

From the beginning we have voiced the principle that charges and shorter hours would mean effective discrimination against the children of working class parents, and it goes without saying that we believe that good child-care *should* be available to every child.

There is a notion, held by some people in the women's movement, that alternative childcare should not be council financed on the grounds of vulnerability if that finance is withdrawn. But surely a centre has less chance of survival if it has the crippling problem of continually raising its running costs by its own efforts. The logic of the argument escapes me. People pay rates and taxes and have a right to expect that this money is used to provide services which operate in their interests (albeit that they may have an understandably short term view of their interests). The very existence of our centre is evidence of the failure of local councils to provide adequate child care. I see no reason to let them off the economic hook as well.

The fact that the children's centre is council financed is one of its most important features. If we were dependent, in whatever shape or form, on private finance and enterprise, any remnant of political justification we might have would evaporate.

Strengths and weaknesses

It has always been implicit in the politics of the Children's Community Centre that part of our activities should be to stimulate and help people to start other centres. From the beginning we have made all our information as accessible as we could. When we opened the Centre we produced a pamphlet describing the struggle up to that point. After three months we had a press conference for local and women's liberation journalists. In May 1973 we had a very successful public meeting which increased our solidarity as a group and where we invited all other groups and individuals interested in starting similar projects. We write and encourage articles and go to speak to other groups when invited. There is a second, more comprehensive pamphlet in the pipeline and a film in the making. Visitors are welcomed wherever it's convenient.

Naturally, we are under close scrutiny from many quarters. Do we stand examination? Are we a legitimate experiment in an overall move towards an improved child-care system? Can we build policies and structures in the CCC which ensure that the progressive political development of everyone involved outweighs the cheap service we give Camden Council, or are the contradictions too great? We are a cheap way out for the local council but that is also our bargaining power, slender though it is at present. Councils are under pressure to provide decent child care facilities and they are looking for ways out. Their willingness to encourage all forms of voluntary help is sufficient proof.

Meaningful expansion of national nursery facilities in the interests of working class children must include enormous changes in both the ideological and practical content. For the right to control a miniscule experiment in this field

we pay in vast amounts of time and energy.

There's no way of knowing at this stage what the larger implications of this experiment will be. We know our existence means positive support to those directly involved and indirect support to those working along similar lines. But we are walking a tightrope and we have no way of knowing if it will break before we reach the other side. But anyway there's a lot more reality in this project than there was in the abortive campaign of two years ago.

Valerie Charlton with the CCC Collective

First published in RED RAG, No. 5 1973

Personal postscript

It's now a year since *The Patter of Tiny Contradictions* was written and it seems to me that the patter has turned into thunder. Nevertheless, it is becoming possible to see the roots of the problems we felt in embryo at that time. It's been a year of endless discussions about the politics and survival of the centre, culminating in a comprehensive pamphlet which describes everything but the agony that went into producing it. Confusion about the issues, lack of time, lack of energy meant that it took eight or nine months to produce. However, it was worth it.

Perhaps the most pressing of our problems this year was the need for more paid labour. Inflation has meant that more women are being forced *out* to work and this has put pressure on us to take a higher percentage of children of 'working' parents. We were forced to take another full-time paid worker who we could barely afford, thus putting a stress on ourselves that should be put on the council. We were refused an increase in our grant this year on the grounds that we were too small and didn't cater for enough children to make it worthwhile for the council to spend more. However, people at the centre argue that our size is responsible for the informality and friendliness

and is what enables us to avoid the institutionalisation of many nurseries. This is true, but how does it relate to need and to the economics of solving the nursery shortage and infant schools with 30-40 in a class?

Struggle is something which is built into the CCC and the defining factor is 'voluntary labour'; from this spring all the contradictions. The selection of a percentage of children is conditional on at least one of the parents working at the centre and the labour of these parents is used to provide free day care for a number of children whose parents have full time jobs. Because the division between parents who work at the centre and those who don't is defined by the job they do and the hours they work, it is, loosely, a class division and it's no accident that the majority of parents who work easily at the centre are part time or ex-teachers, because this provides both the time and the know-how. But having said that, it would be wrong to assume that these parents are without their problems, especially the women, many of whom are single parents. In many cases, women in this group can ill afford to work voluntarily, and having their labour used to subsidise 'working' parents, who sometimes because of their work are better off, can and does breed resentment.

We have always considered ourselves to be a parent - controlled nursery and this has been one of the centre's most highly valued features but it becomes clearer and clearer that the parents who take the most active part in decision-making remain those who work at the centre, in other words, the more professional parents. And let me say I'm not being critical, because it is this group of parents who are responsible for the centre being so well run. I do, however, think some very confusing situations have been set up, not least, for parents who are less involved and have less control. For example, there's a lot of talk at the centre about breaking down professional barriers, and these exist not only between paid workers and parents but between parents and parents. But I think there's a danger of using benevolence and patronage to mystify and disguise the barriers when the fact of the matter is that

control is inevitably in the hands of professionals, (which raises the question of how different is that to any other nursery?).

We realised a year ago that we needed a learning workshop where people with no teaching experience could learn the skills, but, again because of pressures on everyone, it could only be one evening a fortnight and it wasn't enough to make a serious impact on the situation. Yet the fact remains that it is unrealistic to expect people to work with young children without the support of either past experiences or some sort of parallel training scheme.

Over the past two years there have been many attempts to set up nurseries similar to ours but, to my knowledge, at this time the centre still exists in splendid isolation. Now, if this means that the combination of factors which allowed it to happen was a unique combination, i.e. a liberal council, women in women's liberation who were teachers, a particular locality etc., then it doesn't say much for its value as a repeatable model. But it is interesting that it may have taken exceptional circumstances to create a situation where a lot of ideas could be made real and therefore tested. For example, I now think we have to find ways of establishing parents' control of nurseries and schools which is not linked to voluntary labour, for if it is we are asking for trouble. Apart from the way it defines and limits which parents have control, the use of voluntary labour must undermine trade union struggles for better pay and conditions for nursery nurses and teachers, and where does that leave us?

Even if the centre can't easily be repeated, it is there to be examined and used as reference in all sorts of ways and it still continues to serve a vital function for those involved. We are, however, left with the problem of how to get more nurseries which satisfy the needs of women as well as children.

Valerie Charlton
August 1974



TO WE'VE GOT
TO DIET YOU -
IT'S A CRISIS

CAREER
WITH
PROSPECTS

EQUAL
PAY

HOUSE BOUND
WIFE & MOTHER

LOW PAID
WORKER

Sexism, Capitalism & the Family

THE FAMILY UNDER CAPITALISM *****

The Conditions of Illusion

Wherever we look the image of the happy Western nuclear family greets us; from advertisement hoardings, television advertisements, women's magazines and television programmes. The education system still streams boys towards the world of work and breadwinnerdom and girls towards the fulfilment of their putative primary roles as wives and mothers. Marriage and the family appear to be thriving. And on the surface the institution may appear to offer many rewards, especially to women; security (both emotional and economic), a devotion to personal relationships and the creation and care of new human beings, as opposed to the often tedious and impersonal world of 'work'.

However, the Sunday supplement dream not only bears no relationship to reality whatsoever, it positively belies what I believe most of us know to be the truth: that the consequences of the isolation of the nuclear family are destructive to all its members, and particularly so to the women and children. The question is not whether we think there is something wrong with 'the family', but whether we have the confidence to admit what we know, in the belief that alternative ways of living and working together are possible. Ult-

imately this involves a historical and theoretical understanding of the nature and function of the family unit in past and present society. But for many women it may mean initially building up and understanding that all the so-called minor irritants and discontents they experience in their day-to-day lives as wives and mothers are an inevitable consequence of the objective situation they are in, not simply personal neurosis, to be cured by an afternoon out, or by pills or therapy.

The ideological pressure to see themselves as primarily wives and mothers affects all women; it is part of the fabric of our society. For women who work and have families it becomes a double burden, in which their work, whether it is financially necessary or done because of their individual interests, is secondary. While they may take their place in the world of paid work, there is no-one to take their place as a mother. For women who work and who have made the conscious decision not to have children, there is often a sense of emptiness, a sense that there is something else they could be doing as well. For women who, because they can afford to, have accepted the notion of wife and motherhood as full time life and career rolled into one, the pressures of the dream are at their most intense. They have committed everything and thus have, apparently, most to lose.

Part One

Although I went to university, and thus, in theory, had more opportunities open to me than to most women, I always assumed I would get married and have children. It was a question of 'when', not 'if'. When I tried to get a job after I got my degree, I discovered, like many other graduate women, that potential employers were more interested in whether I was prepared to take a shorthand and typing course than in my education. The world of work was a hostile and frightening place. By contrast, the prospect of getting married was a tremendous affirmation of my

self-identity, of my ability to make decisions which were meaningful to other people. Secretly, it was also a relief - I no longer had to worry about whether I would meet 'Mr. Right'; marriage proved that I had. My existence as a woman was publicly justified and everyone was happy. I no longer needed to worry about work as such; the new partnership was far more important.

We planned our family with love, creativity and excitement. From the moment of conception to how we would tell them about sex and religion honestly, whether we would mind if they called us by our names instead of 'Mummy' and 'Daddy'. We were convinced that we would avoid all the mistakes our parents had made; we were different, we were going to share everything, we were equal. We were in love.

Things went well at first; I got pregnant when we decided, the first child was a boy - also what we wanted. The occasional physical discomforts of pregnancy, my self-consciousness at the way I looked (none of my friends had children yet), the condescension of the maternity hospital staff - all these were minor irritants.

Reality crashes in as soon as you get home with your new baby. Mother and father sharing? Well, as much as possible, of course. But if he's the one who's got to go out to work, he's not there during the day when there's most to be done. Suddenly you are alone with a tiny creature who is totally dependent on you. I used to check that the baby was still breathing every couple of hours; for the first few weeks you search everywhere for this maternal instinct which is supposed to materialise along with the baby. After minimal instruction in the maternity hospital, you are on your own. Babies are, in fact, extremely resilient, but the elaborate mystique of mothercare is such that you inevitably end up feeling paranoid and inadequate.

While child care books and pamphlets stress that each child is 'different', at the welfare clinic babies

are weighed and measured every week, minute details about their progress being recorded. A dog being groomed for Crufts couldn't have more attention than a first child; and, while health and welfare are obviously important, the standard is always the mythical 'average' child, with the mother as genius if her child is developing faster, and moron if her child is developing slower. As soon as you become a mother, you enter a new community of other women. In the street at the clinic, each mother eyes the other babies to make sure that hers is cleverer and more beautiful than the others. The world of mothers is one of tacit but cut-throat competition in which each mother is convinced that her bundle is best. It so appalled me that I soon decided to have nothing to do with it. After all, mine was better than any of theirs, anyway.

The social world of parents is that of outcasts. While theoretically exalting the states of motherhood and childhood, in practice both are treated as excrescences on the smooth surface of society:

The mother with prams and push-chairs isn't at the forefront of planners' minds when they design every new building with flights of narrow steps. Even in what is regarded as the woman's domain, like department stores, high rise flats etc., women with young children are simply not catered for. In fact, every aspect of our environment is designed with one thing in mind, the adult healthy male; mothers, along with the physically disabled and the very old, are ignored.
(Lee Comer)

In addition, children aren't yet allowed into pubs, are not welcomed in cinemas and theatres (unless there is a 'special' separate children's show on), are shouted off flower beds, and are generally desirable only when in the background as garnish, seen and not heard, but, more often than that, not even seen at all in the adult social world. A child's place is in the home, with its mother. And we are not simply expected to grin and bear it, but to welcome the isolation with starry-

eyed gratitude:

Children keep parents from parties, trips, theatres, meetings, games, friends. The fact that you prefer having children, wouldn't trade places with a childless couple for anything, doesn't alter the fact that you still miss your freedom.

Of course, parents don't have children because they want to be martyrs, or at least they shouldn't. They have them because they love children and want some of their very own ...Taking care of their children, seeing them grow and develop into fine people gives most parents - despite the hard work - their greatest satisfaction in life. This is creation. This is our visible immortality. Pride in other worldly accomplishments is usually weak in comparison. (Dr. B. Spock).

The popularisers of the ideas of Dr. Spock and John Bowlby have a lot to answer for. In fact, the quotation above implies that the effect of having a child is the same for both parents; it isn't. By stating (with variations here and there) that a child is best off with its mother for virtually the whole time for the first few years of its life, Spock and Bowlby place the whole of the day-to-day responsibility on the shoulders of the mother, and create an ideological wall which keeps other people out. People who make decisions not to have children themselves are also making the decision to steer clear of the mess and clutter (and rewards) of other people's children. After all, if they wanted some they would, as Dr. Spock says, have some of their 'very own'.

When you have children and take them to visit friends, you have the effect of bringing wild animals into a flower shop. Even friends who claim to like children are reticent, afraid to interfere. Children belong to their parents, and in the case of small children, mother always knows best.

In fact, mother *does* know best. But the famous maternal instinct, female intuition, that telepathic communication between mother and baby, is born of the

circumstances and the necessity to learn, rather than some inbuilt genetic trait peculiar to women. Through the intimate and continuous contact with a baby, one learns a whole non-verbal language. Cries which to other people sound like noise can, to a mother, because of this contact, communicate happiness, hunger, wind, pain - with a clarity as great as if the baby could speak. It is like the telepathy between twins, lovers or even very close friends, where an intimate knowledge of the other person enables one to pick up clues which may be totally invisible to strangers. Because of the close contact between the biological mother and her baby, it is she, rather than the father, who learns these signs; by contrast he is heavy and unsubtle in his understanding of what the small baby's emotional and physical needs are.

The subtlety of communication between mother and child should be something to extend to other kinds of relationships, but in the context of the family it has a confining backlash. You understand your child best because you want to and have to; so the rest of the world thankfully leaves you to get on with it. If you are ill, depressed or just plain bored, no-one can simply take over. The job isn't simply functional, it is emotional too. The child senses when someone less sensitive to its needs is looking after it. If you are ill, you find yourself instructing your husband or friends to look after the child in exactly the way you do. Because the child inevitably becomes insecure, having been deprived of the full attention of its mother, you then have to cope with feeling guilty because you are responsible for the child's unhappiness.

The combination of this total and perpetual emotional responsibility with the sheer physical work involved in looking after a home and a child (or children) means that often there are long periods when anxiety, guilt, keeping the house going take up most of one's emotional and physical energy. The idea that you are doing the whole thing out of 'love' becomes so much part of the landscape that you forget about

it. You begin to identify that vague, nebulous, seductive feeling of pure romantic love with all the drudgery and worry; the dream doesn't hold up too well against such a background.

The problem is compounded with the birth of a second child. We planned our second child, like our first. We rationalised the age difference between them as follows: 'If they're only one year apart they'll be competitive. If they're three years apart, the gap will be too wide for them to make friends. Two and a half years is the ideal gap. One child will get lonely, three children means too many years coping with babies, two children is just right. Two children will replace us on the planet; ideally they should be a boy and a girl'. The plan worked perfectly, except in the last detail: the child was another boy. The illusion of free choice in the way we were planning our lives was still so strong that we felt a sense of failure at not having managed a girl. We had just missed being the perfect family.

Two children are more than twice as much work as one. A toddler and a baby demand totally different kinds of care and attention. They eat different food, have different routines, wear different kinds of clothes. Above all, they demand different emotional responses. No longer being the centre of attention, the first child is justifiably affected by her/his displacement. Another human being is demanding half his precious emotional share. The situation makes it inevitable that the child is jealous. As a mother you have to compensate for this displacement, while, at the same time, trying to give the new baby everything you gave the first child. Inevitably, you fail.

The work is more than doubled, the emotional strain is more than doubled. You have to be mother and psychologist at the same time. And all the time you have been trying to remain a wife, the adult companion of the man you married. The impossibility of maintaining a cool, smiling control in the face of the

contradictory demands from children and husband means that one's sense of purpose as a wife and mother begin to blur increasingly. For me, until the point at which my second child was a few months old, all doubts and discontents were assimilable. But now the family I wanted was a living reality and what could I see? Isolation, a sense of never being able to keep up with the constant mess and chaos, an inability to respond adequately (according to my high ideals) to the children. Guilt at my inability to be calm and coping, maintaining an orderly house in the face of an apparently ordered world. A profound sense of bewilderment and guilt, that I wasn't what I could describe as 'happy' looking after the children and being a housewife. Loving the children, and, after the first two hours of the day, longing for the moment when they both slept in the afternoon so that I could be alone. Even now, I am hurled awake in the morning by the happy sounds of children arguing or playing loudly; the apparently crucial dream time just before waking is always interrupted if you are a mother. Almost every day, for the last few years, for me, has begun with a violent awakening. In those very early days there was no-one who really understood the dilemma; although I complained to and with other mothers, it was always half-jokingly. No-one ever admitted they didn't like being full time mothers. Perhaps some did. But since every woman's loyalty was primarily to her husband, none of us could really be honest with each other. For one of us to explode at the impossibility of the situation would have been too threatening for the others; we were all vulnerable to being thought failures.

It is too easy for women, unhappy in their roles as wives and mothers, to see themselves as individual failures. By nature you *should* be happy. Therefore if you are not you're unnatural. Your children and husband depend on you. You can't walk out or go on strike. There are no apparent wages or conditions of work to argue about. And to whom can you take your complaints? You have no boss. You made the choice, the

free and natural choice. You got married and had children out of love. Romantic love is an ideological mask for many other truths. The security of the home and its deceptive freedom from the immediate control operative in any work situation have their own backlash. You lose contact with any sense of the 'real' world, and you think in frames of reference and a language which are looked down on by most people - 'women's talk'. After a while you come to relish the misery of this isolation as a frying-pan alternative to the fire of exposure as a possible failure; after years of being used to living in a home alone with your children, you become terrified of confronting the world of work and other people outside your family. The isolation is both the cause and the consolation, and every detail in it becomes grossly exaggerated. A child accidentally spilling orange juice on a just-cleaned floor can spill you into a morass of hysteria. I've said nothing about my recurring feelings of resentment and violence towards everything, including the children - perhaps because I have most guilt and fear about these feelings. The emotional maze has no way out.

What actually happens is that you go mad. But nobody notices, not even you. I use the word 'mad' to describe a state of dislocation in which you don't know where or who you are. You are a kind of bewildered prize in the tug of war between children and husband. Your life should be heaven but it feels like punishment and prison. There is no time or space to worry about yourself; you are constantly at the mercy of the demands of those around you. No woman can emerge from this situation totally undamaged, and many women are damaged severely. It's just that the signs are dismissed; they're 'neurotic' or 'hysterical' or 'unnatural'. On the surface women cope, children grow up physically healthy, the family facade is maintained. But, for the woman, her sense of herself has been pushed into the background, in favour of a series of different, and often contradictory, masks which she is required to put on, to play all the roles demanded of her in her function as wife and mother.

Part Two

Economic

The majority of women are either totally economically dependent on their husbands, or substantially so; if they work, they either earn a lower rate, work at less well-paid jobs, or part time. Within the family, where the wife does not work at all, and thus has no visible earning power, the situation is not seen as *dependence*, but rather as *sharing*. You could say it was a fair distribution of labour. But his work is defined by another place and by set hours. Above all, his job is defined, and he is paid for it. Your work is never done because the place you work in is also your home, and there is always something to do. No-one pays you; no-one defines the limits of your job; it is defined by negatives; the only thing you don't do is earn the money and go outside the home to work. The fact that money, and with it the means for survival, comes into his hands first means that there is an embargo on demands by the woman for him to share the housework. He can refuse to get up in the middle of the night to look after the baby, to do his own washing, to cook or clean, on the grounds that he needs to conserve all his energy for his own 'work', because that's what earns the money to keep you all going. On the one hand, a woman's work is not defined as work because it is the only necessary job in society not given a money value, on the other hand it is defined as work for the husband only when he doesn't want to do it, and places his own work as a priority. If he does 'help' with the housework it is as a favour to his wife, out of love for her, not out of responsibility towards his share of it.

The woman's relationship to money is indirect; she is responsible for spending it - on necessities and luxuries - but not for directly earning it. Thus she can never buy anything as an autonomous individual, she has to ask her husband for the money (even with a joint bank account this is the basis for the different relationships

husband and wife have towards money which is just earned by the husband). If her ambitions are for a bigger and better house, she becomes a power behind the throne, needing to manipulate her man, or 'encourage' or 'advise' him to get on in the world so that the family can have what she decides it needs. It is the fact that she is screened, and that basically most husbands prefer it that way, that turns her into a wielder of psychological power.

The economics of marriage are hidden; it is only when a marriage breaks down that men and women have to cope with the fact that marriage is as much an explicit economic contract as an emotional one. For the woman, this screening from a direct earning relationship means that she is only of value to her immediate family. They are the only ones who depend on what you do in the house. You therefore face the contradiction of being totally needed at home, and totally ignored outside it. In public you are painfully aware that everyone sees you as his wife, not as yourself (whoever that might be). You accept society's definitions of wives; they're only needed in the home. On the one hand you dismiss yourself with 'Oh, I'm only a housewife', on the other you are seething, because you know that the hours you spend working are extremely long; on the one hand you see yourself as not understanding the world of money, wages and prices, on the other you know that you run a complex organisation, doing all the work, and managing intricate budgets in your head. The idea of women's work at home being done for love is so deeply rooted that many men find it personally insulting to suggest that what their wives do can be seen as 'work'. This implies that they have bought their wives in some way. That there is a market where women are bought and sold. Well, there is. The survival of a woman who is not economically independent is as dependent on her husband's feelings for her as that of a slave is on his master's estimate of how useful the slave is to him. In both cases the husband/master has the ultimate power. Often it is not one he

welcomes, but the fact remains that society places the power in his hands and then punishes his wife if he won't behave in the way he ought - support her till death do them part. It is virtually impossible for a woman to earn enough to support herself and her children if her husband leaves, or they separate and he either will not, or cannot afford to, support two households.

Unconsciously, I believe most couples have some awareness of this fact. It is hard to see how such a power-conflict situation can avoid affecting whatever relationship a man and woman have before they get married. Many couples have interminable arguments about money; others, thinking themselves more fastidious, perhaps, have tussles of will, psychological battles. These are attempts of the individuals to transcend the crippling unity into which their economic situation forces them. However, the independence is a question both of economics and of fighting for a totally different living situation from that of the family; within its structure the illusion of independence is gained either through a permanent situation of conflict, or one in which the two protagonists mark out different areas of power.

Control in the home

The world is mediated to the wife through her husband. Money comes to her via his work; psychologically her experience of the world is also at second hand. When they go out together he probably handles the money, and the process of transaction. Because his life is broadly divided between two places - home and work - he is better equipped to cope with relationships with other people. Work outside the home is social, you see and have relationships with other people. Men represent 'the world' with good reason; they own it and run much of it.

The helplessness which a woman experiences outside the security of her own home serves to increase the intensity with which she then knows and controls her

home. Generally it is the woman who decides how the house is to be organised, where everything - clothes, cutlery, dishes etc. - will go. A man may not be in political control of his work, but he is in control of his working function. By contrast, when he comes home he is in his wife's world; he is helpless. It is necessary for him to be helpless so that she can at least maintain control of the area she's got; it also gives him another excuse not to get involved with the house and the messier parts of caring for children. The woman is subconsciously aware of the precariousness of her control and the game takes on a hectic collusive quality: she complains about his helplessness, while encouraging it by implying he can never do anything properly about the house ('couldn't even boil an egg'). He is allowed to perform structural jobs, make bookshelves, wash the car (work outside the house, even when he's at home) but none of the intimate, personal functions which are a woman's domain. If he could do them as well as she, he would be a threat to the small bit of autonomy she's got. And then she would be redundant. While he may occasionally cook a perfect meal, or look after the children if she's ill, just to prove he could if it were his 'job', he too steers clear of a real sharing; both need to keep the roles and the power areas in them delicately balanced.

Motherhood and roles

The responsibilities of a mother are multiple; you not only have to feed a child, keep it clean and healthy, but you also give it love, help it to learn to live in the world, transmit the values and ideas you believe to be important. At first you have to do practically everything for the baby; dress it, change it, wash its clothes, hold its head up, create a protective environment in which it can be warm, fed, comfortable and happy.

Because a woman's work takes place at home, and is presumed to be motivated by love, she performs many functions for her husband which are similar to those she performs for the child. She cleans the house, washes

his clothes, empties his ashtray, makes his bed, buys and prepares his food, looks after him when he's ill. She creates for him a protective environment in which he can relax when he comes home from a hard day's work, in which he can be warm, fed, comfortable and happy. As soon as there is a baby in the house, most of the day is taken up doing these things as mother-functions. But as she does the same for her husband, the distinction between mother-and lover-functions becomes blurred. She becomes mother to both husband and child. He is no longer simply a helpless man, but a helpless child.

However, while her role may become blurred to herself, it is less so for her husband. He still expects the mother to be the woman he married, to maintain the uncluttered sexual relationship (before children imposed restrictions on their autonomous relationship), to throw off the new harrassed Mum-image and compete favourably with all the single, sexy women out in the world. The woman's problem is that the nature of her work is such that she has to be whatever is demanded of her at the time, and most often those demands are contradictory and impossible to meet. She is everyone's emotional cushion; one minute she may be nurse to baby, the next minute she is required (and often requires herself) to play intelligent, sexy companion to husband. She has to please children and husband, and take the emotional consequences of failure if she doesn't.

Mother as teacher and child

A full time mother is with her child or children for almost 24 hours a day. This is because you are acutely conscious of the child all the time, even when it and you are sleeping. From birth until the age of five, the mother is the chief socialiser, teaching the child ideas and values as well as purely mechanical things like how to eat with cutlery, use the potty, walk and talk. A child's first ideas about the world come from its mother. It is a ludicrous situation; cut off from

most social and work situations, a mother is supposed to be able to train her child to take part in them. While investing most of her own emotional energy in the child, and inevitably causing the child to be similarly dependent on her, a mother is at the same time expected to bring up a child who will not be frightened when separated from her at school, to bring up her child to be friendly and outgoing, responsible and co-operative, and a whole range of other liberal qualities. A mother is expected to be the perfect teacher and to produce the perfect object: the clean, charming, curious but not obstreperous child. The burden of ideas about 'creative' motherhood is especially strong if you believe in some form of progressive education; you are supposed to allow the child freedom to turn the house upside down in the interests of free development, knowing that you are the one left with the mess when play is over. It is no wonder that most children feel deeply threatened and insecure when their mothers are not with them. They have never learned to trust anyone else; indeed, why should they, unless other people show they are to be trusted, that they take the same kind of responsibility as the child's mother.

There are advantages in the closeness of the relationship; as well as the subtleties of the communication system you develop between you, continuous contact with a child means that as well as teaching, you also re-learn. Emotional spontaneity in play; you giggle at apparent trivialities, the threshold of your emotions resembles that of the child; from fury to bliss in three seconds flat. Contact with small children is liberating in many ways for adults. It puts us back in touch with our basic, more naive responses to things. When children begin to ask questions we have to reassess our world from the way it may appear to a child, we have to find simple and clear ways of expressing complex ideas and explaining situations. In answering a child's questions we become more aware of the way in which we see the world ourselves. You can mess around with paints, make noises, roll around on the

floor, and learn to play again. As a child learns to speak it explores language; you also explore language, imitating the child as it makes efforts to imitate you. The process of learning becomes in itself a private language; you use baby talk which is only clear to your own child. You may draw your husband into the private language, and behave towards each other as though you were both children again.

However, the liberating effect of this relationship is again defined by the isolated situation in which it occurs. It is a clandestine activity. If you talk baby talk in the street people will think you're mad. If you persist, they'll think you are regressing. You have to switch on different languages at different times. This is immensely confusing for the child; at home he may experience you as a friend, free and equal in some situations, controlling in others, but in the world he sees you as a more authoritarian mediator. It is a while before you can explain to a child why it is you encourage him to ask questions about everything at home, but if he asks a questions about race or sex on the bus in a very loud voice, it is less easy to answer honestly, and more often than not you evade answering without explaining why.

While some of the emotional freedom may extend to your husband, that too has its limits. If you have an argument and burst into tears he is likely to accuse you of being hysterical, whereas if his child reacted in the same way he would have accepted it as a response. In some situations being free to respond emotionally is seen as retrogressive, while in others it is charming and desirable. As a mother you have to learn to switch being a child on and off according to who you are with, and often this involves a betrayal of your relationship with your child. Within the home, the child feels your loyalty is to him, outside it, to other adults. The emotional power you have over your child is immense. You are his central source of emotional security. This means that until the child is old

enough (often not till well into the teens) you can not only express affection and happiness towards him, but also take out on the child all the frustrations and angers you feel about other people and situations.

Mother as sex subject and object

Women are taught that their sexual role is basically the submissive one in the complementary game to men's aggressive role. Women's sexual power takes a more insidious form than men's; while appearing passive and docile and pretty they must also develop ways of being sexually competitive with other women and psychologically making sure their desired man notices that they're there. The game is an unpleasant and elaborate one, of different forms of power play, and in most relationships this pattern dominates sexuality as much as other areas.

Our prevailing sexual morality is a repressive one, and it is naive to assume that two individuals, subject to the moral pressures and ideas of society, suddenly develop a liberated sexual relationship just because their decision to marry means they have the moral and legal sanctions of society. Women's economic and psychological dependence on men is also a sexual dependence. Husbands still want their wives to be sexy (so many women's magazines feature short-cuts to how a housewife can suddenly whip off her work mask and put on her dolly mask when her husband comes home from work), women still want to be reassured that they are still desirable.

To a certain extent the rules of the game do not apply in the physical relationship between mother and child, which is close and profoundly sensual. At first, you *have* to handle a child; you touch every part of its body intimately, you are in contact with all its bodily functions: you feed it, clean its vomit, change nappies, powder its body, caress its softness. Of course the contact is maternal but it is also sensually pleasurable for both of you: skin on skin. Feeding a small warm baby in the middle of the

night is one of the most serene and sensual experiences possible.

This contact, sensual but rarely consciously seen as such because of the powerful incest taboos that still prevail, is predicated on a situation in which the mother is in control. She initiates the contact, and then has to restrain this response in relation to other children and adults. The sensual freedom between mother and child contrasts with her relationship with her husband in which she is once more the child, waiting for his initiative, his approval. Her passivity exaggerates the need she has for control over her child, and the control she has highlights the passive role she has to play with her husband and other people.

Coda - noise and tyranny

In the maternity hospital I took great pride in being able to distinguish my baby's cry from all the others. Somewhere in the first Act of Edward Bond's play 'Saved', a baby wakes up and cries. Its mother is watching television and doesn't feel like responding. The baby wakes properly and cries louder. The mother again ignores it. The baby really gets going, settling on a pitch of emotional stridency which is exactly the right frequency to hit the threshold of noise tolerance. By the end of five minutes I was squirming in my seat.

The baby's cry expresses need; other sounds express happiness. At first, with a new baby, one is constantly alert to try and understand the meanings of different sounds. You learn. And the baby also learns that you, as mother, are the most likely person to respond and be able to satisfy its needs - you are the only person there. However, the emotional demand is a one-way system; the child demands and you respond. After a while, constantly available for any emotional demand at any time, you are screaming inwardly too, for your right to be heard, to be allowed to make a demand. The availability is physical too. The power you have to take out your frustrations on the child is returned. The child makes physical demands on your body too. Tugs at you, climbs all over you; your feelings, your mind, your body are not your own. They

belong to something you created yourself. The word you awaited most eagerly from your child, 'Mummy', becomes a signal for inner panic - 'What now?' Often, the only time you can be alone in the house is when you lock yourself in the lavatory, and even then the child is likely to come and bang on the door.

Anything you do is a threat to your child's security; the child knows that it's totally dependent on you and, in self defence, becomes a tyrant making petty compulsive demands to be reassured. Children are sensitive; they are right to be insecure. If one of their parents goes, half their emotional world disappears. We have no right to expect them to feel secure. It is not their fault, and yet, battered by demands, often one wishes violently to be completely rid of them in order to get some sense of one's self. Ironically, even when you can go out alone, it merely takes another strange child in the street to shout 'Mummy' to evoke the reflex response 'What now?' The condition of motherhood is always with you.

Answers

The home is a place of refuge and shelter from the rest of the world. It is a defensive oasis: the front door isn't just a plank of wood, designed to keep out the rain and the prying eyes of neighbours, but a symbol of the division between two worlds - the outside, public world, and the inside, private world. We are told that, as women, we belong to the private inner world, caring for children, free to organise our time, unfettered by tedious jobs. We should be grateful. But caring for children in isolation is a non-starter; we produce isolated children. We are free to organise our time to do housework which becomes meaningless, to be isolated and unstimulated, cut off from all contact with other activities. What began as a dream of love and security, a challenge, the building of a home and family, becomes a nightmare.

I've said little about the way men and children are specifically oppressed by the nuclear family structure. This is partly because children have still got their lives in front

of them (if they survive their family horrors) and men have some compensations denied to women. At the very least they can get out of the house and see there is a world outside the four walls. They have more structures within which to organise change if that is what they think is necessary. It is also because I believe that the impetus to change the organisation of the family must come from women. After all, we know more about it than men, and have more power than children.

The work women do in the home is socially necessary; people must eat, have somewhere to live, clothes to wear, be looked after when they are ill. Children must be looked after, loved and taught about the world. The nuclear family structure is the worst possible structure within which to perform these tasks, and within which to build our closest relationships. There are many good reasons why Western society so manically defends the family. As Margaret Benston points out in a pamphlet called *The Political Economy of Women's Liberation*:

...the amount of unpaid labour performed by women is very large and very profitable for those who own the means of production. To pay women for their work, even at minimum wage scales, would imply a massive redistribution of wealth. At present, the support of a family is a hidden tax on the wage earner - his wage buys the labour power of two people.

When women have been needed in production, the State has hastily provided nurseries (as during World War II); but even nurseries, or the argument as to whether the answer is to acknowledge women's role in the home by paying them a wage, do not touch on the central idea, which is the surface motivating force behind women's 'choice' to become wives and mothers; and that is, that women are naturally more suited to those roles than men. It is nonsense; any human being (including many children) can care for another, can do housework, can love and look after babies.

It is also an insufficient argument to say that child rearing only occupies five or ten years of a woman's life.