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breaking the SILENCE

a feminist quarterly

Feminism Goes Global

Nairobi Notebooks


Feminism in Latin America

Coming Together:

New Visions of


Women's Sexuality

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about *Breaking the Silence*

For too long women's voices—our struggles, and joy—have been silenced. Living in a patriarchal world, we have been separated from one another and from the mainstream of society.

The *Breaking the Silence* collective is committed to giving women a voice. In particular, we provide a forum for discussion of the social welfare needs of women—needs such as support services for survivors of violence, affordable housing, sufficient and good daycare, adequate pensions and employment.

We are committed to moving toward a world absent of oppression: be it sexism, racism, classism, homophobia or ageism. We are committed to helping to build a peaceful and humane world: a world where women's ideas, experiences and activities are heard and made visible.

collective comment

Many of us have been asked by devout readers of *Breaking the Silence* and others why we printed the article on lesbian-feminist sadomasochism in the last issue of the magazine. Is it really an important enough issue to merit so much attention? Can it be dealt with in a feminist forum like *Breaking the Silence* without endangering our movement's basic humanistic commitment?

When I sold copies of *Breaking the Silence* to some women, I was seized with the fear that after reading the article, they would conclude that feminist issues don't really apply to them and move away from feminism.

I decided to put some of my reservations about the issue of lesbian S/M on paper. After I wrote them down and shared them with other collective members, it became clear that my thoughts were quite representative of the rest of the group. So while I write this as an individual, I am at the same time raising many of the questions that other collective members have also been grappling with.

I believe that all realities experienced by women must be examined and evaluated in feminist publications. *Breaking the Silence* does aim to address issues that are relevant to women within the feminist community. As I feel that the article did have a place in the pages of the magazine and that it is important to raise and consider difficult issues, it is not hard to defend the decision to publish it.

However, at the same time, I am painfully aware that focussing on certain issues, and perhaps lesbianism in particular, may further alienate many women from the women's movement. Decisions about publishing articles such as this one are inevitably fraught with a tension between trying to reach out to a wide range of women and exploring questions of relevance to a smaller and perhaps more insular part of the feminist community.

One issue raised by this article for me is whether the feminist emphasis on choice means that everything women choose to do under the feminist banner is all right. I don't

think so. Are we not on somewhat shaky ground when we dismiss women engaging in S/M with male partners who state they feel safe and in control and yet condone and support the practice between women?

I seriously question the assumption that women who relate to women operate with a set of entirely new and non-oppressive rules and behaviours simply by virtue of being women. The gender roles of men and women are socially constructed. As biologically identifiable women, we are all taught how to fit into the gender role of "woman." Even as conscious feminists, we remain socialized products of a society that has carefully taught us to accept and participate in systems of domination. To believe that women can behave in ways that completely and consistently challenge our socialization is to deny what we have always argued—that our existence and choices as women are to a large degree conditioned by our social order.

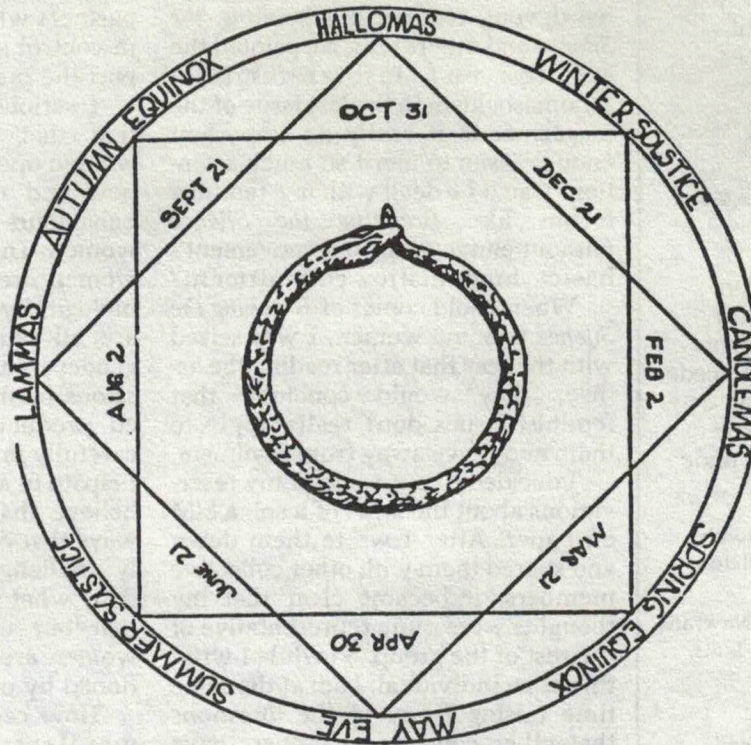
How can we so easily condemn manifestations of patriarchal ideology in men and at the same time deny its presence in ourselves? Do we really believe that becoming feminists or lesbians will make us immune to patriarchal values? How can our choices be separated from the patriarchal parameters that contain them?

To me, S/M represents not only violent interactions between individuals but the perpetuation of the eroticization of unequal power relations in our sexuality. I am profoundly saddened to think that women are fighting to legitimate that dynamic. Getting out of our patriarchal chains would make it possible to, as Susan Cole so aptly put it at the Sexuality Conference, "eroticize equality."

I cannot accept that all choices, or all experiences, are equally valid and good for all women. The true strength of feminism has been an ability to recognize and challenge the boundaries and patterns of a patriarchal society that limits our true choices as women, and to envision a world that surpasses the patriarchal constructs that presently exist within us and outside of us.

by Joan Riggs

Winter Solstice



A Sabbat for Yule

by Deborah Gordon

There are eight Sabbats in the witches' year, four Greater Sabbats and four Lesser Sabbats. The four Greater Sabbats are Candlemas (February 2nd), May Eve (April 30th), Lammas (August 1st) and Halloween (October 31st). These occasions were the four great yearly feasts celebrated by the Druids and by our Celtic ancestors.

The Lesser Sabbats are the two solstices at midsummer and mid-winter and the two equinoxes in spring and autumn. These occasions also were celebrated as festivals by the Druids.

The Sabbat has associations which are older than Christianity. 'Sabadius' or 'Subazius' was a title of the orgiastic god Dionysus, the god of ecstasy, who was worshipped with wild dances and revelry. The celebrants of his Mysteries raised the

cry of "Sabai" or "Evoi Sabbai." This is the most likely derivation of the word, 'Sabbat'. Centuries later we find accounts of the witches' dancing in which this word is used as a cry: "Har, Har, Hou, Hou, dance here, dance there, play here, play there, Sabbat, Sabbat!"

Some modern witches believe that a certain psychic impulse, or magical current or tide, commences at the equinox or solstice, reaches its peak at the following Greater Sabbat, and then declines until the next station of the sun, when a new magical tide commences, and so on. Thus, for instance, the tide which is set in motion, coursing invisibly through all Nature at the winter solstice, reaches its peak on Candlemas, and then slowly ebbs until the spring equinox, when a new impulse commences, and so on.

Witches celebrated (and continue to celebrate) these old ritual occasions with dancing and enjoyment, drinking to the health of the Old Gods, and generally holding high revel. In the old times, they lit big bonfires outdoors in some lonely place, and several covens might gather together on the Sabbat night.

Witches like to hold their Sabbat at a place where there is some natural source of water, as it is one of the Four Elements of Life, the others being fire, air and water. With the ritual bonfire, and perhaps a lake or a running stream nearby, the witches have all the sacred Four Elements, being surrounded already by air and standing upon the earth.

Today's "celebrations," which are synonymous with time off work, drinking and watching television, pale in comparison with the Witches'

'gentle path of Old'. I try to celebrate the holy days of the ancient calendar when I can, when it is meaningful to me. Z. Budapest, author of *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* encourages women to "not allow (our) soul(s) to grow without tending to the spirits of our ancestors."¹ She asserts:

You are part of a never-ending continuation and it is perfectly all right to take heart and sustenance from the past. When you allow the spirits to awaken in you, difficulties will be clarified and unseen powers suddenly revealed. Do not forget that the Goddess is re-emerging in the public consciousness today, but She had been with you from the beginning, and She is all that is attained at the end of desire.²

At the winter solstice, about December 22, the sun reaches its southernmost point. This is the day with the fewest daylight hours in the Northern Hemisphere, marking the beginning of winter. Two years ago, I wrote a song to celebrate this death and birth of the sun's light. The chorus goes like this:

She dies into a cold winter night
 She's born again to be light
 Queen of the Moon
 Queen of the Stars
 From loving Nature, our
 Mother of Change
 She has come
 Winter Solstice has come again.

On the winter solstice we celebrate the birth of the Sun Goddess, Lucina. In the Dianic witchcraft tradition, women hold a ritual to welcome Lucina to the earth. Women will wear evergreen crowns with lit white candles symbolizing the Sun Goddess dispersing the darkness. Standing in a circle, surrounded by decorations of pine bows, mistletoe, holly and ivy, each woman kisses the woman to her left on the eyes, the lips, the breasts and genitals. When this is completed, one woman who is in the position of the Goddess (the High Priestess) will say:

*Aphrodite, Arionhod,
 Lover of the Horned God,
 Mighty Queen of Witchery and Night,
 Morgan, Etoine, Nisene,
 Diana, Bridgid, Melusine,
 Am I named of old by men,
 Artemis and Cerridwen,*

*Hell's dark mistress, Heaven's queen.
 Ye who would ask of me a rune,
 Or who would ask of me a boon,
 Meet me in some secret glade,
 Dance my round in greenwood shade,
 By the light of the full moon,
 In a place, wild and lone,
 Dance about mine altar stone;
 Work my holy mystery.
 Ye who are feign to sorcery,
 I bring ye secrets yet unknown.
 No more shall ye know slavery,
 Who give true worship unto me.
 Ye who tread my round on Sabbat night,
 Come ye all naked to the rite,
 In token that ye be really free.
 I reach ye the mystery of rebirth,
 Work ye my mysteries in mirth.
 Heart joined to heart and lip to lip,
 Five are the points of fellowship,
 That bring ye ecstasy on earth,
 For I am the circle of rebirth.
 I ask no sacrifice, but do bow,
 No other law but love I know
 By naught but love may I be known.
 All things living are mine own,
 From me they come, to me they go.³*

The women light a fire, (you might use lit candles surrounded by red and yellow pieces of tissue paper if you are indoors), while the High Priestess says:

*Queen of the Moon,
 Queen of the Stars,
 Queen of the Horns,
 Queen of the Fires,
 Queen of the Earth,
 Bring to us the Child of Promise!
 For it is the Great Mother
 Who gives birth to the new year.
 Darkness and tears are set aside,
 When the Sun comes up again.
 Golden Sun of hill and mountain,
 Illumine the world,
 Illumine the Seas,
 Illumine the rivers
 Illumine us all.
 Grief be laid and joy be raised,
 Blessed by the Great Mother!
 Without beginning, without end,
 Everlasting to Eternity.
 Evoe! lo! Evoe! lo!⁴*

Women then jump over the fire, making a wish for the new year, saying it as they leap. A toast to the Goddess follows with the usual feasting and dancing. Afterwards, the circle is closed and thanks are given to those who participated and to those who watched. A blessing may also be said.

The most liberating part of celebrating the Sabbats and embarking on the path of Goddess worship, in general, is that there is nothing rigid or fixed in these celebrations. Rituals can be researched, and symbolism relearned and applied by any

group of women who are inspired by Nature, by the Goddess. Z. Budapest reminds us that "the important thing ... is that beyond a certain structure upon which we all agree, creativity is the order of the night."⁵

A brief glimpse into our ancestors celebration of the winter solstice reveals the creative spirit at work:

In Egypt at the time of the winter solstice, the people led a cow around the temple of Helios seven times and this perambulation was called "seeking for Osiris." The sacred cow was the goddess herself.

Doreen Valiente in *The ABC of Witchcraft*, tells the story of the Star Fairy, which is an inspiration to celebrate the winter holidays in a totally pagan way:

The yuletide tree, with its bright bubbles and the star on the top, is a miniature version of the World Tree of our pagan ancestors with its roots deep in the earth, the sun, moon and the stars hung on its spreading branches, and the Pole Star on its topmost point. Sometimes the star is replaced by a fairy doll, who represents the Goddess of Nature ruling over the world.⁶

In France, Dame Abonde still comes to the children, the good fairy of toys and gifts. The twelve days are feasts, with role changes between women and men, children and adults. Mystical plays are performed, pantomime plays acted out, masks and costumes donned, dances held.

Celebrating the winter solstice is reclaiming our natural attachment to the cycles of nature, to the forever-flowing change of life. It is a taking back of our emotional and spiritual need to have meaning in the ritual and ceremonies we take part in. We must create and be fully involved in the symbols which represent birth, death, and the life process. We are reclaiming the night as feminists. Let us reclaim ritual celebrations as "wholly" feminists!

bts

(1) Z. Budapest, *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*, (Oakland, California: Susan B. Anthony Coven No. 1, 1977) p. 32.

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) *Ibid.*, pp. 33-35.

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 33.

(6) Cited in Z. Budapest, "Winter Solstice," in *Thesmophoria* 4, no. 5 (1982/83), p. 1.

Feminism Goes Global



ISIS

Nairobi is over and our second decade is just beginning. In this issue, articles about the conferences in Nairobi, and the struggles of women in parts of the Third World are highlighted. One of Breaking the Silence's very own members attended the Forum at Nairobi (the non-governmental conference) this past summer. Sherry Galey's report in "Nairobi Notebook" sets the stage for the following articles on women's struggles in countries in Africa and Latin America. As well Cathy Cameron, another Ottawa woman who attended the conference, reports back on her illuminations as a participant at

Nairobi.

For those of us who didn't attend the conferences, the excitement and energy that were transmitted at the Forum are palpable in Sherry's and Cathy's reports. The other articles in this section by and about women in the Third World are perhaps more sobering, yet in their own way they are also exciting and energizing. Women are moving. That is the message that predominates. In our own countries, in our own ways, and in our own time. But we share global links. As Sherry and Cathy point out, we First World Women need to learn more about the global links in the

chain that binds us all. If we don't, we run the risk of becoming liberated in our own culture, yet participants in the oppression of other women, our sisters, in the Third World.

BTS is pleased to help to set the tone for feminist work and debate during the next decade, by presenting feminist issues in this international light. There are thousands more stories to be told: personal accounts, group activities, rural and urban struggles by women which all may lead to a better lot for us here and in the underdeveloped world. In 1985, we are only just beginning!

NAIROBI, KENYA
TULIKA NA MKUTANU ZANA YA
WANAWAKE WOTE WA DUNIA

If you can read Swahili, you'll know that the sign says that Nairobi, Kenya was the site of a meeting of the world's women this summer. An international gathering of women unprecedented in size and scope, it was, at the same time, a milestone in the development of global feminism.

I am, in fact, describing two parallel conferences hosted by the city of Nairobi that ran from July 10-26 and overlapped each other by a week in the middle. The United Nations conference was held to mark the end of the Decade for Women and to formally review and appraise its achievements. The Forum was intended to bring together women from all over the globe to make their own independent assessment of women's progress toward the goals of the decade - equality, development and peace.

The official conference gave the 3,000 delegates and observers, most of whom represented the governments of the U.N.'s 160 member states, an opportunity to determine how far governments had come in meeting the decade's goals, to identify the obstacles encountered along the way, and to set out concrete strategies for the future.

Most feminist observers saw that the U.N. conference was not the best place to get an authentic and accurate picture of the international position of women. For one thing, most governments tend to publicly exaggerate their progress toward women's advancement and underestimate the real oppression women continue to suffer. Some of the most repressive and brutal regimes in the world know all the right rhetoric about their commitment to women's full integration into society. Their leaders expound on how well women are doing, while we know full well that in their countries, starvation, disappearance and death are daily occurrences for women and children.

Nairobi Notebook: A Personal Voyage of Discovery

by Sherry Galey

Politicization

There was widespread criticism that the official conference was "politicized". It was. But politicization itself does not disturb feminists who believe that all political issues facing humanity are issues that concern women, and that all women's issues are inherently political. How could it be otherwise when, at the heart of conflicts over apartheid, the Middle East, foreign intervention, nuclear disarmament and the global economic system (to name just a few of the most contentious), are fundamental differences and inequities in the distribution of power and resources.

The problem, in our view, was not that these matters were inappropriate topics for women to discuss, or that they diverted women's attention from

the real "women's issues", but that the male-defined structure of the conference fostered the same old divisions. Creative feminist approaches to solving persistent world problems were never given a chance. Furthermore, the definition of political still belies a male approach to defining the serious issues facing the world and does not really recognize the major challenge to the existing order that the feminist program poses. For example, women's demand for a redefinition of work to include domestic work, child care and other forms of unpaid work requires a major shift in values, gender relations and social organization that is deeply political in nature. This has yet to be fully understood by male-dominated governments and power structures.

Charlotte Bunch, a feminist theorist and U.N. watcher, reminds

us that no government puts the interests of women first and that few have qualms about using U.N. Conferences to advance their own platforms. She points out that countries like the U.S. lobbied hard to have the conference avoid "political" issues and stick to the kind of women's issues that it would find non-threatening. On the other hand, many developing countries politicized the conference by charging that women's disadvantaged position was caused primarily by the South's exploited position within an unjust world system and could not be changed without a new international economic order that shifted resources from the North to the South.

In Bunch's opinion, many industrialized countries hide behind a narrow definition of women's issues which enables them to express their concern for the plight of poor women without dealing with the role that their governments or corporations play in that oppression; while for many Third World countries, the same avoidance syndrome calls for the reverse — emphasizing grievances about international economics but not examining women's subordination in their (own) societies."

our needs, desires, hopes and goals, this was the place to be. I was one of almost 500 Canadian women lucky enough to participate. Many women were sponsored by women's organizations or international development agencies. Others were unaffiliated and got to Nairobi under their own steam.

My trip was made possible by MATCH International Centre through a special grant from the Canadian International Development Agency. MATCH is the only international development agency that is also a women's organization. It works exclusively to support the struggles of women through overseas project funding and education in Canada. MATCH had a special interest in the Forum since its very formation was inspired by the Conference in Mexico City that launched the Decade for Women in 1975.

My goal for MATCH was to bring back ideas, information and resources that would help our ongoing effort to convey to Canadian women the complexity of the issues facing women in poor countries. In addition, I wanted to learn more about ways to foster solidarity between Canadian women and women in developing countries based on mutual respect and understanding. My personal objectives were many,

considered a meeting of women newsworthy enough to cover it in the first place. Even though the Forum was five or six times as large as the official conference, and many times more dynamic and productive, it was taken much less seriously by the mainstream media. It encompassed a range of activities never before witnessed in a global meeting of women. There were two thousand formal and informal workshops and discussions on the entire spectrum of women's issues, from the situation of Third World lesbians to feminist analyses of militarism to the impact of the economic crisis on women. An excellent display of appropriate technology for women was called "Tech and Tools", while numerous cultural events and trips into the countryside to meet with Kenyan women, spontaneous speak outs and solidarity rallies, and the most comprehensive and exciting group of films and videos on women by women ever collected in one location were presented. But the media, for the most part, did not let the world know what was going on at the Forum.

The few who tried were unable to capture the Forum's spirit and diversity. Media people trained in "event" journalism were at a loss to know how to begin to cover the Forum, where hundreds of "events" all happened at the same time. They resorted to highlighting the activities of star feminists like Betty Friedan who held court daily under a fig tree, or Bella Abzug who took pleasure in "slugging it out with the Soviets" (figuratively speaking) and Angela Davis who stood outside the Peace Tent denouncing American foreign policy to a receptive audience.

You never found out about the content of the discussions the rest of us were having — all about the way that millions of women's lives are being affected by the food crisis, the Third World debt crisis, male violence and militarism, the destruction of the environment, restricted access to contraceptives, and exploitation by transnational corporations. In Nairobi, the media once again betrayed their lack of interest in and ignorance about a global movement that is engendering massive social change in many parts of the world.

I know it will be impossible for me to go home and not see the international aspect of all issues, and not ask my government to do the same.

Forum '85 — The Real Thing

While the drama and intrigue were being played out across town at the Kenyatta Conference Centre, I was at Forum '85 — the other Nairobi — or, as I like to put it, "the real thing". If you wanted a realistic and multi-faceted picture of how women saw the last ten years in relation to

however, my burning desire was to see for myself whether feminism as I understand it is relevant to women in other parts of the world.

Media coverage

It was the government conference that attracted the attention of the world's media, at least those who con-

What we did get was coverage of the "mind-numbing, rancorous wrangling" of the official conference, where states, already divided into the usual blocs - East, West and developing nations - lobbied for specific language in the "Forward-Looking Strategies" document. We

endless line-ups, or being infuriated by constant inconveniences, or being disparaged by other women, or being excluded from discussion for lack of translation facilities, or being kicked out of their pre-paid hotel rooms when the official delegates arrived.*

Other women recount their surprise and joy at discovering common ground with women of vastly differ-

Nairobi is but a faint memory.

The event itself was like a snapshot, depicting the international women's movement in microcosm at one moment in time. It reflected not only our incredible diversity as women and the barriers to unity that our differences present, but also the strength, solidarity and enormous potential that are evident when women work together for our common good.

Civilization is at risk if the women's movement does not advance. We have made compassion and love and equality a common cause.

learned that wording assumes great importance when consensus is at stake, and the difference between "poverty" and "mass poverty" is an entire world view. Conflict-oriented journalists also zeroed in on the dramatic but not unexpected clashes between delegations that make good stories.

The Flavour of Forum '85

The Forum was a deeply personal and distinctive experience for each woman who went. While hearing other women's stories of Nairobi is wonderfully evocative, the Forum they describe is not always the one I remember. The broad outlines of our stories are similar, but we all know a certain part intimately, and each of us tells her tale differently.

So it is hardly surprising that so many contradictory adjectives have been applied. According to first-hand reports, the Forum was, simultaneously haphazard, spontaneous, fragmented, informal, responsive, academic, invigorating, frustrating, rejuvenating, enervating, confusing, illuminating, disappointing, stimulating, painful, conflictual, spirited, harmonious and unpredictable.

Some women tell of waiting for workshops that never happened, or trying in vain to keep up with the frenetic pace, or wasting time in

ing backgrounds. Or their pain and humility upon hearing the day to day survival struggles of many women. Or their excitement at being able to bridge the language barrier with photos and hugs. Or the relentlessness of the learning process. Or their comfort at being constantly surrounded by women. Or their pleasure and pride in learning about their own strength and the strength of their sisters.

It is important for those of us who went to share the flavour of the Forum and try to make it come alive for others as an event, especially given the dismal job done by the media. But it's even more important to find ways to incorporate the lessons of Nairobi into our feminist analysis and action.

We should begin by seeing the Forum in a historical perspective and in relation to the development of feminism. It was not an isolated event, nor an orphan child of the decade, nor the dawning of an entirely new era, nor the culmination of anything but an arbitrarily designated ten-year period called the Decade for Women. Instead it should be considered as a high point in the continuing process of women struggling for change all over the world - a process that began many years ago and that will no doubt last long after

Lessons from Nairobi

Before I left for Nairobi, I recall reading old press clippings about the mid-decade meeting in Copenhagen which made much of the split between white, middle-class women from rich countries and poor women of colour from developing countries. It was reported that many Third World women rejected feminism as being irrelevant and alien to their cause. This sentiment was aptly captured by the phrase that "to talk feminism to a woman who has no water, no food and no home is to talk nonsense." I went to the Forum wondering if this feeling would prevail and if five years had changed this perception of feminism.

One of the most significant things about the Forum was that it was held in Kenya, an underdeveloped African nation. Not only did this facilitate the participation of African women, but it also provided a context for discussion that could not ignore the realities of life for the vast majority of our sisters in the South. How could we avoid discussing the causes of underdevelopment when our surroundings constantly reminded us of its effects?

The major lesson of Nairobi for me was that over the last decade

breaking the silence 7

The scales of equality are out of balance. The side marked 'woman' is weighed down with responsibility while the side marked 'man' rides high with power. Today, almost all the world's wealth is on man's side, while most of the world's work is on woman's.



Wendy Hoile

women have become increasingly aware that the dominance of men and male values is the single thread that winds through all cultures and affects women everywhere while at the same time recognizing clearly that gender oppression interacts with other major factors that position women in the social structure as a result of race, class, nationality, and religion, and need different strategies to deal with it.

In order to respond to the challenge of building a global feminism, Canadian feminists must do some serious learning and questioning of our assumptions. We must expand our vision of feminism, enlarge our understanding of women's issues and include a wider range of women in the women's movement. Exclusivity will be the death of feminism.

8 *breaking the silence*

There is no uniform category of women with a set of common interests. While women as a group share a common need to eliminate the globally unjust sexual division of labour or gain control over their fertility, the way in which these needs express themselves in everyday life can lead to significantly different definitions and strategies. So for example, while affluent women in Canada may struggle for the right to have abortions, the struggle of poor women may also be to afford the children they want to bear, and the struggle of poor women in developing countries may be against enforced sterilization. The common reality is that as women our bodies are not our own to control and the decisions over our fertility are made for us by others. As feminists, we must find

ways to work towards satisfying women's immediate needs. At the same time we must link our strategies to a clear understanding of our common interests and a broader vision of a radically transformed society.

Those of us who live privileged lives must question the basis of our wealth and our country's wealth and ask what impact our lifestyles and our nation's policies have on people in other parts of the world. We must align ourselves unequivocally with the poorest, most marginalized and oppressed in the world (most of whom are women) and actively support their struggles for change. We must come to grips with the fact that Western women don't have a monopoly on organizing for change to benefit women or defining feminist issues. All over the world, pockets of

indigenous feminist protest are emerging in response to local conditions.

We must confront racism, heterosexism, classism and ageism in our lives, ourselves, and in our movement.

When feminism is not practised in order to integrate into a world organized for the benefit of men, capital, and powerful interests in industrialized countries, but to challenge all forms of inequality and injustice, then perhaps women of all races, religions, classes, nations abilities, ages, and sexual orientations can come together under its banner, and move forward together. Charlotte Bunch brought her years of activism in the international women's movement to bear, when she said in Nairobi that "the challenge for feminists around the world is to change the concept of feminism from being a luxury item for the elite to being a mass movement."

I felt a strong impulse from women of North and South alike toward developing a feminist perspective that unites us around our common opposition to all forms of injustice, exploitation, domination, and destructive values, and our common desire to transform society so that all humanity can live in a just, peaceful, egalitarian, participatory, and humane world. A perspective that must respect and leave room for differences.

We still have a long way to go before we know exactly how to do this best, but we women have started asking the right questions and working our way slowly toward some answers. The essence of the dialogue in Nairobi will be at the centre of the development of global feminism and the international women's movement for many years to come.

After Nairobi, I am more convinced than ever that feminism has the potential to be a world view and em-

bryonic new politics that offers the only real hope for the survival of our planet and its inhabitants. *bts*

** To put the reported lack of organization and chaos of the Forum into perspective, some facts should be presented. From my point of view, that the Forum worked as well as it did is a testimony to the tremendous capacity of women to organize under the most adverse of circumstances. Just sixteen months before the Forum was to open, Nita Barrow, the Forum's convenor, had only \$1,200 in the bank. There were no paid organizers until just six months before the event. Funds for the Forum had to be scrounged from international organizations and sources other than the U.N. Almost all the organizing work was done by volunteer women working in committees located in New York, Geneva and Nairobi. Forum organizers faced constant uncertainty — the dates were changed twice — and the ineptitude of the Kenyan government who were ultimately responsible for the accommodations fiasco. The Kenyan authorities also hamstrung the FilmForum by renegeing on their promise to admit international films without prior censorship and tried unsuccessfully to close down the Peace Tent.*

The time has come to articulate the position that feminism cannot be monolithic in its issues, goals and strategies since it constitutes the political expression of women from different regions, classes, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. There must be a diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women and defined by them for themselves.

Questions to Ponder

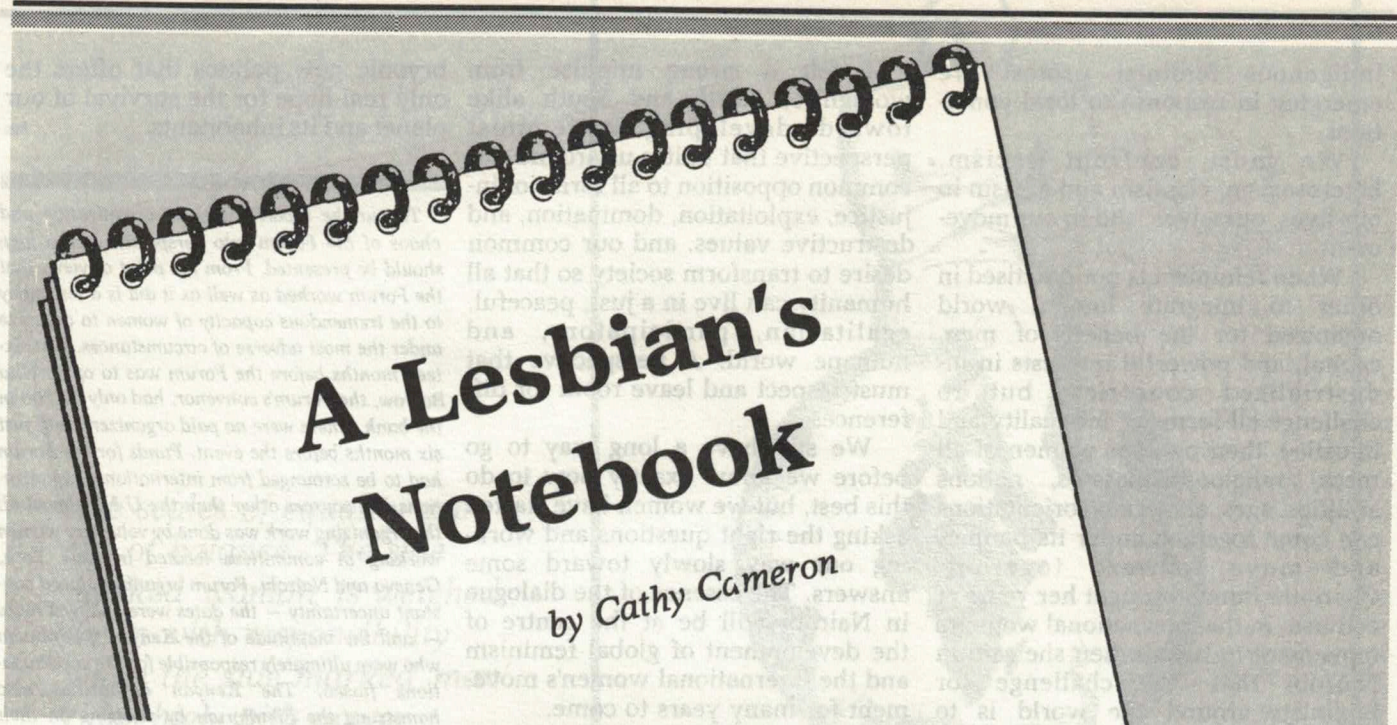
What kinds of feminist or women's activities, movements and concerns are generated by different national or cultural conditions? How do these differ and what — if any — seem to be common themes in women's concerns internationally? Can we talk about the global oppression of women — its causes and its cures — in any universal terms?

How do particular governments, economic structures and social systems affect women's lives in work, childbearing etc.?

How does the feminist movement relate to class-based and other social movements — both in theory and in practice? What is the role of women's revolution within nationalist movements? Must women always

subordinate their emancipation for the greater good of society? How do we respect the self-determination of previously colonized countries while criticizing their anti-woman practices?

What are the prospects for women working together cross-nationally? Can women overcome our ethnocentrism, racism, homophobia, etc. and unite as a global movement?



A Lesbian's Notebook

by Cathy Cameron

Pre-Forum

Before leaving for the women's Forum in Nairobi, I contemplated my participation as a Lesbian. Reading the pre-conference and press materials, among them the Gay Community News story of May, 11, 1985 - "Lesbian Status at Kenya Conference at Issue" - it became clear that I should be thoughtful about my Lesbianism. The report noted that there were "persistent rumours that the Kenyan government considered denying visas to Lesbians and that Lesbians at the conference may even risk imprisonment". Possible grounds for the rumour was a Heritage Foundation report entitled "A U.S. Policy for the U.N. Conference on Women" which encouraged the Kenyan government to impose "tight controls on entry visas to Kenya to exclude the most radical of the prospective delegates ..."

The official Kenyan line was that there was no intention on the government's part to exclude or imprison Lesbians; however the Chargé d'Affaires of the Kenyan Embassy, Mr. G.W. Uku said "In Kenya, questions of gays or sexual orientation is not a matter of public discussion". Also Rose Ngayuny of the Kenyan Consulate in New York City said that homosexuality "is not tolerated whatsoever" in Kenya, it is simply "not recognized". These rumours made me

feel apprehensive about being "out" at the Forum and certainly the need to be cautious.

In many ways, I prepared myself for not being a visible Lesbian. I was prepared to cope with being silenced and instead to focus my energies on the many other aspects and issues women would be gathering to share. I reasoned with myself that it was not such a big price to pay for the privilege of being at this global women's gathering where there were certainly issues of more critical importance to a larger majority of women. Even with this reasoning, I was aware that this silencing is part of the oppression which Lesbians face daily in a homophobic world.

Part of my consideration was for Kenyan women and their government laws. Would my visibility create risks for them in their lives after we foreign Lesbians had come and gone? It was important for me to be respectful of their reality and to appreciate that in many places where Lesbianism isn't tolerated there can be severe consequences for Lesbians. (In the Sudan, Kenya's neighbour, for example, discovered Lesbians are punished with the death sentence).

So I went to Kenya with a watchful and open mind. Travelling with a group of three "straight" women made getting into a non-Lesbian frame of

mind easier and although I was nervous checking through Kenyan customs, no-one at the border recognized me as a Lesbian: fears created by my vivid imagination were relieved.

At the Forum

Despite my travelling group's non-homophobic attitudes and respect for my lifestyle, I was never-the-less outside my familiar and supportive Lesbian community, so after a couple of weeks of pre-Forum travel, I was looking forward to being with some Lesbians again. So when I saw the International Lesbian Information Service (ILIS) display on the main lawn, I was delighted and rushed over, greeting the women with "Oh, Lesbians, I'm so excited to see you". Unfortunately, they weren't so excited to see me and their response was less than welcoming. It became obvious I had blurted out something inappropriate as I paused to look around at a crowd of mostly men, staring at me after my spontaneous outburst.

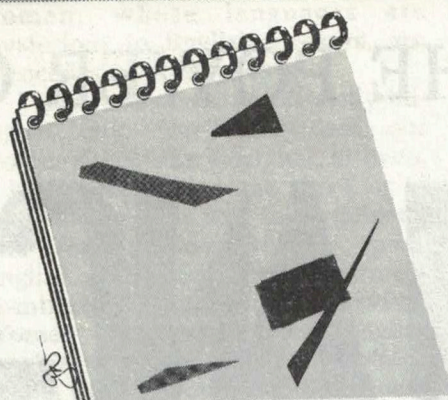
Later the cool reaction of the ILIS women was explained as they described the attempts by the organizers to remove their display on the grounds that distributing materials was prohibited. They were also experiencing a lot of verbal

harassment from people who didn't appreciate their presence. The organizers later retracted their statements, saying that the incident had just been a misunderstanding in an attempt to keep the grounds clear. However, Lesbians involved felt that it had clearly been an effort to minimize Lesbian visibility and that any explanation was a cover-up for the generally homophobic attitude of the Forum organizers, especially since networking through the distribution of materials was one of the prime features of the Forum.

There were very few Lesbian workshops announced in the official calendar of events. Those that were announced had mild, apolitical titles such as Lesbians and Education or Lesbians and Health. This presumably was related to the pre-Forum warnings.

However, none of the official discouragement had a lasting effect on Lesbian participation. Since we developed such fine-tuned networking skills, we quickly and effectively gathered. A Lesbian caucus was arranged which met daily behind the Peace Tent. There we discussed the politics of Lesbian visibility; problem-solved around the reaction to our visibility; and organized the logistics of making information available to women who had not previously had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss Lesbianism. At the same time we organized workshops to discuss issues of importance to Lesbians as well as announcing any Lesbian-related activity, such as the plan to fill a local discotheque and create a women-only dance hall for the evening (possibly an unprecedented event for Nairobi).

In doing all of this, we forgot to build in a caring environment for one another. The political work was done, but we neglected to include in our precious Lesbian caucus the room to nurture one another, a critical way we challenge patriarchal, unfeeling structures in our home territories. We forgot the part where we allow ourselves to express our hopes, our fears and needs in order to carry on in often very vulnerable and silencing situations. Sometimes I felt isolated and alone in the very circle where I thought it would have been the easiest to feel connected.



The ILIS lawn display attracted a great deal of attention from Kenyan women and men. Part of the interest was the mystery of Lesbianism. In Kenya, male homosexuality is illegal and can incur a prison sentence of up to seven years. However, there is no word for Lesbian or Lesbianism in Swahili, one of Kenya's two official languages.

Kenya is far from unique in its lack of recognition of Lesbian existence. Many countries, New Zealand included, have laws against male homosexuality, with no acknowledgement of Lesbianism. (The current Law Reform Bill in New Zealand to legalize male homosexuality is being confronted with a movement to make Lesbianism illegal!). A Sri Lankan woman described her Lesbian community as a secret society. Because it is acceptable for women to be affectionate with one another, Lesbians lead their lives without harassment but with total invisibility. An Indian woman reported how she and her lover live together in her mother's home, sleeping in the same bed, and nobody asks any questions.

The sincere interest of many women to learn about and cut through the myths and prejudice facing Lesbians was both heartening and demanding. One day, I breakfasted with two Zambian women. They began talking about "they" (the Lesbians), and the press response to "their" presence. I identified myself as a Lesbian. They were both visibly shocked, and went on to explain that they had never met a Lesbian before, and had understood that all Lesbians were violent and aggressive. I just didn't fit their image. As a journalist, one of the women wanted to interview me to learn more about Lesbian

lifestyles, because, as far as she knew, there was no information available in Zambia. I spoke with them at length, noting that, with rare mention of Lesbianism in Canadian mainstream press or educational system, the general public's understanding of Lesbian choice was not so far removed from the Zambian one.

There are endless stories of course; some positive, some not. It was decided at the caucus that in order to not spend all our energy responding to basic information requests, we would hold a Lesbian Press Conference. Despite the fact that mainstream press chose to ignore the press conference, it was wonderfully affirming and empowering to the Lesbians worldwide. As Lesbians, we defined our terms; the facilitator announced to the press that only Lesbian-positive questions would be responded to. The conference challenged the myth that modern-day Lesbianism is a phenomenon of the immoral white Western society, as Lesbians and mothers and friends of Lesbians from around the world spoke out in support of Lesbian choice.

A statement of solidarity was read, building links with and committing support for the liberation of other oppressed groups, and recognizing common threads which keep us all oppressed. An expression of solidarity with women struggling in revolutionary and liberation movements with men was part of this statement, and reflected a willingness to respect other women's reality.

In the end, and despite the problems, I was impressed with the overall recognition and respect for Lesbian choice among the forum participants. I sensed a genuine openness to learn and to challenge myths regarding Lesbians' lifestyle. The flow of Lesbian energy grew throughout the week as Lesbians from around the world connected and shared our stories, often to discover that we are struggling on the same fronts. It was affirming to see our ability as Lesbians to make our presence felt: to organize, educate and respectfully take the space that is logically ours at any meeting ground of women.

btS

THE POWER OF

by Cathy Cameron

In Nairobi, we spoke many languages. Our mother languages were as varied as the costumes we wore, as the cultures and women's herstories we brought with us. We spoke with one another if not through our different word languages, then with our sign languages; our expressive universal spirits communicating our common bondings, our collective struggle and pain, our differences and joys.

A very pleasurable part of my experience at the Forum was sitting with Kenyan women, as they sat on the grass with their legs stretched straight in front of them, sharing their space, not understanding their words but understanding their meanings.

But in doing so, I became aware of a feature in this Forum which has relevance to our lives here in Canada.

Pre-Forum materials announced that there wouldn't be enough money for translation in all workshops, but that translation would be available for major sessions into English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Swahili.

English is my mother tongue, although I also speak French and Spanish. I went to the Forum with the thought that I would be sitting in workshops conducted in many languages, prepared to participate in workshops in English, and at other times to be part of the crowd struggling to understand the language being used. Instead, what I discovered was the majority of workshops were conducted in English and those that weren't were being translated into English, comment by comment.

The opening and closing of the Forum were mostly in English; announcements over loud speakers were mostly in English. In short, if you didn't speak English, you were at a disadvantage to understand or to contribute.

It has been said that the essence of a culture is held in a language, so if the language is English, we are allowing English culture to dominate. This

LANG UAGE

dominance of the English language and English-speaking culture is reflected in the world economic and political order. For example, scientific information and business communications are typically only available in English.

While having a common language is definitely convenient, we need to be more aware of the power that exists in having one language prevail as the common language.

Kenya provides a clear example of privilege attached to language. Kenya has two official languages, Swahili and English. Swahili was created to provide a common language for all the tribal groups. An indigenous Kenyan woman would learn first the language of her tribe, and Swahili later in school. Should she continue her schooling, she would begin to learn English. If she didn't have the option of continuing her education, or have some other exposure to English, she wouldn't learn it.

As in other colonial countries, learning English in Kenya is closely linked to class and social status. Knowing English means access to information, better jobs, more money – all part of a privileged lifestyle.

The Forum wasn't organized to accommodate Swahili-speakers. Of the Kenyan women, many did not speak English and sat on the lawn, excluded from the mainstream of activity at the Forum being held in their territory.

The inadequate translation services did not deter women from spontaneously translating information. At the beginning of each session, presenters would encourage women to arrange their seating so they could sit next to someone who could translate. Although this was an example of how women manage with what we have, it was hardly adequate, as I found myself, with mediocre French and Spanish, providing translation in some workshops so other women could have some grasp of what was happening. I was in at least one workshop where non-English-speaking women sat through the entire session without understanding.

Of the 1,300 workshops, many

more could have been offered in other languages. There were times when the presenters were struggling to present in English. Why did women feel compelled to present in English? Could we not have shared more equally the struggle to understand a foreign language?

Certainly there was movement to rebalance the situation. The Latin American women set up a series of workshops in Spanish. As the week progressed, more workshops were held in Swahili, French, Japanese, etc. However, women who spoke only English for the most part did not attend these, as there was a vast choice of English events.

In observing the imbalance in Nairobi, I reflected on the similarities with the Canadian situation. English dominance is part of the Canadian experience and is part of the way non-English-speakers are oppressed. In

Canada, Aboriginal and immigrant women, whose languages are mysterious to English-speakers, are silenced in everyday ways.

I live in Ottawa, an officially bilingual city. Yet rarely are our women's meetings bilingual, or even, if in English, with some checking to see if everyone is able to participate. The francophone women speak English, as they have had to learn the dominant language to survive. Women who don't speak English aren't at these meetings at all, which means the movement cannot benefit from their views. Our francophone sisters have cajoled, encouraged, demanded and pleaded that we address our English-only privilege, but finally they have to say it in English, or resort to their own meetings.

I think it is time for women with English as a first language to become more conscious of our power and

privilege and how easy it is for us to be heard. We need to challenge our power by putting ourselves in non-English-speaking circumstances, to know what it feels like to not be able to understand or to say what we think. We need to learn other languages, and stop assuming that everyone is going to be communicating in English.

At the Halifax Women's International Peace Conference in June, participants came away resolved to learn another language. At a recent workshop on the power of language in Ottawa, women resolved to set up a language learning exchange program among women who want to learn another language.

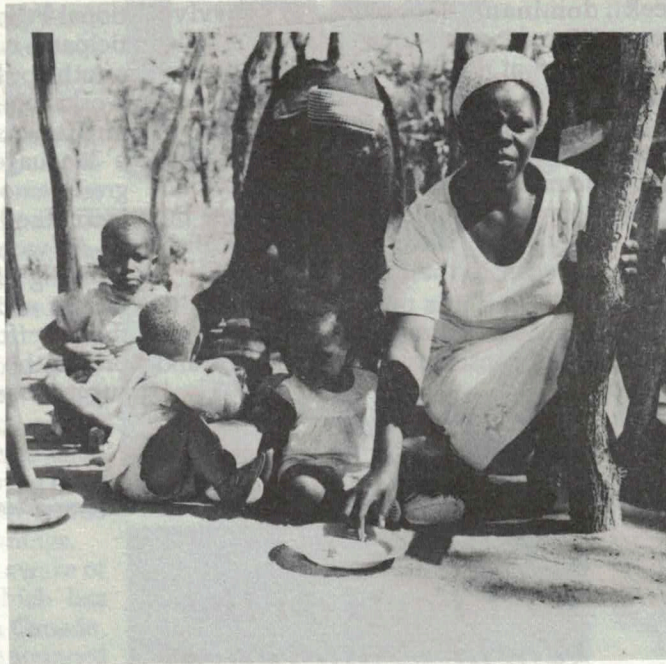
As women who are interested in building closer ties with our sisters locally and globally, let us continue these efforts to understand and bridge the language power gap. Any suggestions?

bts

Fast Facts on the World Conference

- 157 states sent delegations
- Out of 2,100 delegates, 357 were men
- 37 delegations included no men (Canada's was *not* one)
- 2 delegations included no women
- 1,404 media representatives were accredited
- 461 Non-Governmental Organizations were registered
- 50 Intergovernmental organizations participated

Women in Zimbabwe: *The Struggle Continues!*



Joan Anne Nolan

by Joan Anne Nolan

It is not a bold statement to claim that women are under-represented, over-worked and super-exploited. The research papers and discussions generated by the End of Decade Forum in Nairobi bear grim testimony to those facts. And it has become accepted by those concerned that African women are among the most powerless in terms of political, social and economic factors.

The women of Zimbabwe provide an excellent example. They suffered overwhelming oppression at the hands of the white colonizers and yet have emerged with an enviable sense of solidarity to throw off the vestiges of racially-based capitalism and paternalism.

From the outset of nearly a century of white settler rule, the Africans were pushed on to Tribal Trust Lands, scattered along the most barren tracts of soil. The next step in these people's dislocation was the imposition of hut taxes on each family. This forced the men into wage labour in the mines, on farms and in the cities. Men had to travel long distances to work, and families were forbidden to accompany them to the black townships surrounding the white commercial and industrial centres. The women were left in the rural areas to eke out a living on subsistence agriculture, to raise families and to supplement the starvation wage paid to their husbands.

When the struggle for independence and majority-rule began in the early 1960s and intensified during the 1970s, many women joined one of the two principal liberation movements – the Zimbabwe African National Union or the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union – as guerillas. The vast majority, however, had to remain in the rural areas because of their families. With the escalation of the freedom struggle, those men that could not actively participate in the war fled to the relative anonymity and protection of densely-populated townships where the Rhodesian Army was less likely to harass or indeed kill them.

As the liberation war was fought mostly in the rural areas, the women left alone there, found themselves both feeding and supporting the guerillas and bearing the retaliation of the Rhodesian Army. They suffered village massacres, rape, the destruction of homes and the burning of crops.

After decades of exploitation, the independence movement (which brought majority rule, land redistribution, access to social services, and equality to blacks and whites, men and women), forged a consciousness of and a commitment to women's rightful participation in all spheres of a new and free society.

At Independence in 1980, and again today, women have a strong and vocal sense of solidarity as Zimbabweans and as women who must play a distinct and active role in reshaping the economic, social, political and cultural distortions a century of colonial rule had impressed so firmly on the country.

To undertake such a fundamental transformation, they needed and continue to need access to services and facilities they had previously been denied, including credit; equipment; training; information and communication; places where they can meet to work, share and learn; and structures and institutions to support and nurture their collective efforts and afford them the opportunity to voice their concerns and exercise decision-making power.



Joan Anne Nolan

Zimbabwean women have developed their own institutions to respond to their needs and have shaped them according to a vision of genuine empowerment for women. When external development organizations prepared programs of assistance in post-Independent Zimbabwe, many of them discovered three important domestic organizations and movements that had either been created by the women or set up to address women's particular needs within larger constituencies.

One such example is the Zimbabwe Women's Bureau. Soon after Independence, it carried out an extensive needs analysis. Women, chosen from their communities and trained in survey techniques, conducted the investigation. The results showed women had to gain economic self-sufficiency to be truly liberated. Consistent with those findings, the Bureau has become a source of skills training, funds and revolving loans for income-generating projects. The women fieldworkers are selected by their respective areas to provide advice, to arrange educational programs and to facilitate maximum communication between project groups. The emphasis of the bureau is clearly on collective production, equal distribution of profit and shared deci-

sion making and program planning.

The Organization of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP) is another example of the people's will to change their society according to the socialist program articulated by the liberation front during the struggle and now formally instituted by the Government. In keeping with those socialist principles of distribution of production and the equality of women, ORAP has designed and practices a model of democratic decision making, cooperative employment-generating programs and the deliberate promotion of women's participation in all levels of the organization. Members are encouraged to discuss and analyze the nature of their past oppression under Rhodesian rule, to denounce and debate the ongoing elements of sexism in society, to explore their relationship to the international capitalist economy and, always, to collectively determine their role in changing society. It is an approach and philosophy that we could profitably emulate in Canada.

Finally, there is the collective cooperative movement that is providing land, resources and training to ex-combatants, peasants and women. (Women, of course, are represented in both of the former two sections.) Cooperatives range from farms to supermarkets to machine shops. Like the Women's Bureau and ORAP, the cooperatives are a popular response to a system that still bears the legacy of privileges ensured for the Europeans – access to education, jobs reserved for whites and limited options to Zimbabweans to participate in individual wage employment.

It would be gravely misleading to suggest that the women of Zimbabwe have succeeded in their task of genuine equality and self-determination. As Canadian women, we know how difficult it is for the heavy mantle of paternalism to slip away. Yet our sisters there have a clarity of purpose borne of revolutionary struggle. In the words of an old, wizened rural woman: "The first revolution was waged in the bush. The next one will be in the kitchens." bts

Women in Zimbabwe:

The Women's Movement: A Latin American Perspective

by *Adriana Santa Cruz*

translated by *Alma Estable*

In the shadow of the Left

The women's movement in Latin America is as diverse and full of contrasts as Latin America itself. Conditions in each nation are different. For example, the Central American nations are different from those which have scrupulously preserved their democracies; while the southern cone nations sank into the darkness of right-wing military dictatorships, from which some are only just beginning to recover. Latin American women are organizing and raising consciousness in different ways throughout the region.

There is a distinction between the women's movement and the feminist movement in Latin America. Both have grown under the shadow of the Left, from which they inherit their strengths and weaknesses. The majority of organized women on the continent come from the urban poor and peasant sectors; women who have joined together in the struggle for basic needs such as housing, health, food and jobs. Even feminist movements led by middle-class intellectuals tend to focus exclusively on the conditions of working-class

women. However, this unfortunately leaves them without the strategies to convince the members of their own class, who staunchly continue to oppose feminist-inspired social reforms.

A further complication for Latin American feminism is that the Left itself is seriously divided, and, incapable of generating the confidence and consensus it needs, is also undercutting the women's movement. For the first time in Latin America, two "admitted" feminists sought seats in the Peruvian parliament as candidates for the United Left. Their defeat indicates that neither the leftist parties nor women in general were supportive of the alliance.

The women of Nicaragua, El Salvador and Grenada have lived at war with North American imperialism; the women of Chile, Paraguay and, until recently, Argentina and Uruguay, struggle daily against right-wing military rule and misery. It is no surprise that even organized women are sometimes suspicious, and even respond with open rage, to the feminist call for autonomy from patriarchal power,

since this appears less urgent than their daily struggle for freedom. Nevertheless, within the Left, the subordination of women's specific demands to class problems has been a source of tension and resentment. The Latin American parties of the Left are still strongly patriarchal; however, this is being addressed more and more. In Cuba, for example, the *Federacion de Mujeres* has begun to question the revolutionary justification for having women run home from work to cook and clean while their *compañeros* have time to devote to union or political activities.

Women who push for autonomy within the Left, and insist on the specific nature of women's problems, feel guilt, and fear dividing the Left. For a social movement so closely linked to political, social and economic realities; misery and the systematic abuse of human rights do matter. But perhaps it is this dilemma that puts Latin American feminism at the forefront of tomorrow's challenge: the opportunity to confront the inequalities of class and gender simultaneously.



What have Latin American women learned from the Decade?

The years of the Decade for Women have been bittersweet, with much to celebrate and not a little to lament. Latin Americans legitimately question the stated objective of the Women's Decade: the incorporation of women into development. "What kind of development?" we ask. "We women have always been an essential part of development since the beginning of time."

It is also true that Latin American "machismo" does not always reveal its evils openly. Though they may not have to wear the veil, the real women of Latin America are also hidden — behind the image of the "transnational feminine model" — the wealthy, triumphant European woman removed from the context of the real world and in search of a man. The image that we see reflected and publicized by the mass media also veils the tragic reality — the abuse, battering and rape suffered by so many women. Violence against women continues to be an open secret, only publicly addressed by women's organizations. The same

blind eye is fixed on the deaths of millions of women from unsafe abortions, women whose poverty did not permit them the luxury of "choice."

Other manifestations of machismo are everywhere. What about legislation which assumes that the man is the head of the home, when, in some countries, more than half the households are headed by women? What about the assumption that unshared household chores — a responsibility of millions of poorly paid working women — are women's responsibility because of Divine Law? What about the regrettable absence of conscious women from the halls of power, which, as a result, continue to lack humaneness and balance? And last, but not least, what about the stigma still attached to the terms "feminism" and "feminist"?

The list is long, and doesn't end here. But, frightened and misinformed, women themselves help to perpetuate this state of affairs. As voters, women cast ballots for men without demanding commitment to women's causes in return. Although women are largely responsible for the election of Alfonsín in Argentina, they have never before been so

under-represented in Parliament.

To make things worse, the end of the Decade finds us in the midst of a deep economic, social and political crisis. With Latin America burdened by foreign debt and the imperialist policies of Ronald Reagan, it is the women who suffer the effects of the economic crisis most acutely. The rope always breaks at its weakest point.

Nevertheless, we also have much to celebrate from the past ten years. Among the ancient prejudices and taboos, the empty promises of modernization, and the glaring lack of resources, Latin American women are weaving a web whose threads penetrate the fabric of society. This decade has witnessed not only the emergence of the women's movement everywhere, but also of the concepts designed to bring about unpredictable changes.

The greatest changes have occurred at non-governmental levels. By way of contrast, at the governmental level, it has been difficult to get all countries to even ratify the United Nations Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,

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What the State Neglects:

Abortion and Women's Lives in Latin America



Wendy Irvine

by Mercedes Sayagues

I met Mercedes Sayagues at the NGO Forum in Nairobi in a workshop on reproductive rights. Tears of rage and sorrow flowed as I listened to her story. I felt strongly that other women should be able to hear it also. Her words, although very strong, only partially capture the passion and power of Mercedes in person. She kindly agreed to share her work with Breaking the Silence.

Sherry Gale

One chilly morning I walked through one of the women's wards in the Pereira Rossell Hospital in Montevideo, Uruguay. The cots are

18 *breaking the silence*

aligned facing each other across the long room. A gray light filters through windows that had been covered with newspapers to prevent drafts. It was chilly outside, and not much warmer inside. The women wear thick old sweaters while they huddle under their thin gray blankets.

Some sit on their cots, some lie hiding on their faces, some stare blankly at the roof. Some heat water for tea at a kerosene stove at one end of the room. Next to it is a toilet and cold water shower, both of which are filthy and emit a nauseating stench. There is no toilet paper, no soap, and no telephones. Not a nurse is in sight.

At night, cockroaches roam the floors and night tables.

As I walk down the central aisle, watching the women, some watch me. Some are fat, some are thin. Some are young and frail, others look mature. Some have gaps in their teeth, some show signs of malnutrition. They sit or lie quietly, wrapped in solitude, waiting for visits, for the pain to subside, for the time to leave. For some it will be two or three days, or a week or a month. As I retrace my steps back to the entrance, a woman, probably the eldest, asks in a loud voice, kindly, "¿Buscas a alguien, nina" (Are you looking for somebody,

girl?)

Yes, I think to myself. I am looking for you. I am a journalist doing an investigative report on abortion in Uruguay. I am looking for my story. I have found my sisters, thin and fat and toothless and in pain. Yet, this morning, I won't intrude on their solitude. I say I'm in the wrong ward and leave. With me I carry the silent gaze, the silent suffering of these women.

Of the 54 beds in the women's ward, this month 27 are taken by these women, the victims of clandestine abortion. Every year the hospital treats over one thousand women for infections and other complications from these abortions. The Pereira Rossell Hospital is a public hospital, serving mainly the poor. A recent UNICEF study established that 40 per cent of the population of Montevideo lives in poverty. They cannot afford unwanted pregnancies; they cannot afford good medical care.

Yet these women are the "lucky ones." The next morning I visit the sixteenth floor of the Hospital de Clinicas, the largest public hospital in the city, one that is equipped with intensive care units and dialysis equipment. This is where women are brought who are in danger of dying from clandestine abortions. From all over the country they come, some to die, some to be saved. They arrive with severe sepsis and peritonitis. One doctor says that in the last year he performed surgery on six women who had been severely harmed by botched abortions; four of them died. The other two survived but all their reproductive organs had to be removed. Some of these patients undergo several bouts of major surgery and are hospitalized for months. Last week, a sixteen-year-old girl went home after six months in the hospital. The doctor who first saw her says that she arrived bleeding, her womb filled with three litres of blood. She had been aborted during the sixth month of her pregnancy in the back yard of a Montevideo sports club.

The investigative report I under-

took for the newsweekly *Busqueda* in 1983 looked at the issue of abortion in Uruguay for the first time in 20 years. A 1963 study had found one of the highest rates of abortion in the world, some 150,000 per year, about three for each live birth. The study also concluded that over 100 women died annually as a result of clandestine abortions.

Although the 1963 statistics may be somewhat questionable, it would appear that the number of deaths has diminished since, owing to the introduction of the contraceptive pill, antibiotics and intensive care units. I was not able to ascertain the exact number of deaths in 1983 because during the 1973 to 1985 period of military rule, data and statistics like this were always kept secret. The employees at the morgue knew the number of women who had died of abortion-related complications but they wouldn't tell me. I managed to learn that, in Montevideo, it was more than ten but less than twenty per year. In the new democracy, these figures should soon be available. The evidence also suggests that the number of abortions has declined since 1963 thanks to the increased use of contraceptives. Some studies have pointed at a number somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 abortions per year. Dr. Morel of the Uruguayan affiliate of the Planned Parenthood Federation did a study showing that of the 28,000 women seen between 1965 and 1975, the percentage admitting to an abortion went down from 70 per cent to 40 per cent.

My investigative report brought the severity of the problem to public attention. The treatment of septic abortions is a substantial drain on the public health system — one study calculated that between 1973 and 1978 the cost of treating a patient ranged from \$880 to \$7,500. These are staggering sums in a developing country where the per capita GNP is only \$2,560. The report found that treating a septic abortion cost as much as 12 uncomplicated cesareans,

24 normal births or 36 uncomplicated abortions.

It was impossible to find out exactly what percentage of the national health budget was taken up by treating victims of clandestine abortions because of the secrecy of the military government. But figures available from other Latin American countries can help us draw a picture. In Bolivia, for example, the Ministry of Public Health estimates that treatment of botched abortions accounts for more than 60 per cent of the obstetrics and gynecology budget. In El Salvador, a study in the maternity hospital estimated that this kind of treatment took 13.3 per cent of hospital staff and budget.

This has to be seen in a larger context. In the 1970s and 1980s the Uruguayan military authorities did not consider culture, education or health as high priorities. The amount allocated to health in the national budget was reduced to 9 per cent in 1974 and 6 per cent in 1982 while military expenditures soared to 40 per cent of the country's budget. And of the amount allocated to health, the lion's share was used by the military and their families. A UNICEF study showed that 75 pesos of every 100 spent on health went to the military.

Compounding this was the economic collapse brought about by monetarist policies inspired by the "Chicago School" and adopted by the military government which resulted in a sharp drop in earning power and lowering of the average Uruguayan's standard of living. When the foreign debt ballooned from 600 million to 4.5 billion in 1984, problems that we thought we had left behind like child mortality and child malnutrition reappeared — and so did unsafe abortions.

In my study, I learned about many cheap and dangerous abortion methods that women were forced to resort to. For \$5 a midwife will insert a tube in a woman's uterus. When the bleeding and cramps start, the woman is supposed to check into a public hospital, where the doctors

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Coming

Personal Responses
and Reports
from the Women's
Sexuality Conference

by Joan Holmes,
Joan Riggs,
Lynne Tyler
and Nancy Lewis



Together

Introduction

"Coming Together: A Women's Sexuality Conference" was held in Toronto on October 4 - 6, 1985. Side by Side, a partnership of Maggi Redmonds and Natalie Zlodre, organized two-and-a-half days of keynote speakers, workshops, performance pieces and a women's dance.

The more than 30 workshops covered a lot of interesting territory, from "Body Image and Sexuality" to "Humour, Sexuality and Power" and "Anger in Intimate Relationships." Sessions addressed the situations of heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual and celibate women. Keynote speakers

were Susan Cole, co-founder of *Broadside*, Connie Clement, a feminist health activist and managing editor of *Healthsharing*; JoAnn Loulan, author of *Lesbian Sex* and co-author of *Period*, and Mercedes Steedman, a socialist feminist.

This conference was especially significant given the historical conflicts in the women's movement between lesbians and heterosexuals. Bringing heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual and celibate women together at the same conference raised issues that are personally confusing and difficult to address. It was a great relief

that these sensitive issues were dealt with in a positive and non-confrontational manner.

BTS considers the topic of women's sexuality and the need to develop feminist perspectives on this issue to be important challenges. However, it would be impossible to do justice to the full range of ideas and emotions at the conference. Instead, what follows are some personal perspectives and reflections of four women who participated in the conference. The *BTS* collective encourages women to write about the many issues that arose out of this conference. We all have much to learn about women-centred sexuality and your contribution would be greatly appreciated.

Lynne Tyler

The feminist sexuality conference was for me a curious combination of challenging political concepts and freeing but sometimes painful personal revelations, many of which are still tumbling out as I continue to think about my experiences at the conference. Although I found there was often a gulf between the intellectual and the emotional levels of the conference, they came together very well in its most

satisfying moments, and have been increasingly knitting together in the time since.

On the personal, emotional level, I was deeply touched by many of the sessions I went to, and by many of the informal chats in corridors and over meals that discussed points raised in the formal sessions. This may be partly due to the nature of the topic, sexuality being a rather intense and personal issue, but I also think it had a lot to do with the open way in which the speakers and

workshop leaders addressed us.

Several sessions brought me face-to-face with questions in my own life about intimacy: emotional, physical, sexual, and — is there a word to describe intimacy at such a profound level that the only concept I can think of is "soul"? ("How corny," says my jaded public persona, and yet ...) With these questions came all the attendant terrifying risks and dizzying ecstasy. It raised issues of passion, power and surrender.

1 THE FORMATION OF SEXUAL DESIRE
 It is important to understand how sexual desire evolves in order to develop a feminist sexual politics and to make sense of the current debates on sexuality. This workshop will take a look at this issue.
 *Participants are requested to refrain from wearing perfume or deodorant to this workshop.
Varia Bursiyn, a former therapist, teaches film studies and writes about politics and culture.

2 BISEXUAL WOMEN: DO WE REALLY EXIST?
 Bisexuality tends to be entirely overlooked, considered as a cop-out or glorified as the universal, true sexuality. This workshop will explore some realities of female bisexuality, touching on issues of identity and perception, autonomy and loyalty, sexual expression coming out and political implications.
Deborah Gregory has been active in the Women's Movement in Europe and Canada and has written articles about consciousness-raising, sexuality and cultural terrorism. She is presently a member of the Everwoman's Book Collective in Victoria B.C.

3 COMING OUT AS LESBIANS
 This workshop is intended for women who have or are interested in having lesbian relationships. We will discuss the many facets of being lesbian.
O. Lockie and J. Rogers have had experience with women's self-help groups and have facilitated coming out groups.

4 THE SEXUAL EVOLUTION OF WOMEN: AN ADVANCED CLASS
 This workshop will explore, nourish and develop new images of older women's sexuality through presentation, discussion and exercise. Participants may expect to receive information and food for thought, to have fun, and to be challenged to reflect, imagine, share and create collectively.

10 POWER/PLAY: WHOSE TUNE DO YOU DANCE TO ANYWAY?
 The family, as we know it, is the seabed wherein develops competition and the desire for power over others. This experiential workshop will help you transform your intimate relationships from ones of struggle to ones of humour and play.
Judith Weisman is a feminist therapist and social activist.

11 BISEXUALITY: ANOTHER CLOSET
 In this workshop women who are bisexual or interested in exploring that possibility for themselves, open to bisexual and/or supportive women only.
Madeleine Byrnes is a psychodramatist in private practice, specializing in working with couples and groups.

Rita Night, a co-leader of psychodrama and co-counselling groups, is committed to supporting women in the process of claiming their personal and political power.

12 DYKES WITH TYKES
 As a result of the present "baby boom" among lesbians, there are a number of issues facing us as a community. This workshop will explore the part to the traditional family that we are creating.
 This workshop is open to lesbians only.
Amy Gottlieb is a politically active lesbian-feminist graphic artist.

Nomi Wall is a mother, an E.S.L. teacher and an activist in Central American solidarity movements.

13 PATRIARCHAL POWER IN THE BEDROOM: WHO'S ON TOP?
 This workshop will involve an examination of power politics and the heterosexual sex act. The presentation will be followed by discussion.

19 HEALING OUR LESBIAN SEXUAL LIVES
 We live in a misogynist, homophobic society that has taught us as lesbians to hate ourselves. (over) that through our lesbian identity encompasses much more genital contact we tend to identify with our vaginas. This creates undue pressure on our sex lives, with the actual practice of sex becoming difficult. We will look at how we can make our sex lives reflect who we are.
 Open to lesbian women only.
JoAnn Loulan is the author of *Lesbian Sex* (1984, Spinsters' Ink).

20 COMMITMENT, CARING AND CONTRADICTIONS: BEING FEMINIST AND HETEROSEXUAL
 This workshop will look at the particular challenges deciding to pursue non-monogamous relationships with men and within the feminist community.
 Open to heterosexual women only.
Dinah Forbes is an editor, publisher, and feminist who was until recently a member of D.E.C. (Development Education Centre).

21 MONOGAMY AND NON-MONOGAMY: DILEMMAS AND PRIORITIES
 What one thinks about monogamy, or whether deciding to pursue non-monogamous relationships depends on many personal and political intermingles. This workshop will explore some of the relevant theoretical and emotional considerations, from High/Lowline Autonomy to Writing Jealousy.
Deborah Gregory (see #2)

22 EXPLORING PERIODS OF CELIBACY
 The group will discuss stereotypes and images of celibacy and reasons why not being sexually active with another might be chosen. We will explore moving into and out of periods of celibacy within long-term relationships and becoming public about being celibate.

Intimacy in both friendship and sexuality (I am beginning to see that the two overlap much more than I ever thought) involves trust, comfort, caring, love, curiosity, vulnerability, a willingness to learn about myself and be led into parts of myself I didn't know were there, and risk.

A strong and positive intimacy is essentially a relationship between equals: two people who are equally powerful, equally trusting, although often in different ways. But there is sometimes a momentary imbalance of power – it passes back and forth between the two. There are times when I let go of the world and myself, and virtually float free with no idea of where I will end up emotionally and psychologically, simply trusting the other person completely. I call this "jumping off the cliff," and it is not something I do frequently. It's bloody terrifying. And incredibly rewarding. I get the impression that this will always be terrifying, and that if it is not, I am not really letting go, I am only risking partially and the rewards in the relationship will somehow be diminished.

How do we learn to take these risks? What are the steps along the way – are there skills in developing intimacy? How do we choose when to risk? There are certainly situations and relationships in which we would lose more than we would

gain, where the balance of power is too unequal.

These personal issues of power, surrender, and equality were reflected in the political questions that were raised at the conference. Susan G. Cole, for example, talked about the need to "eroticize equality" in the context of a wide range of legitimate sexual choices, to replace the pornographic images and limiting choices that society now presents to women.

I agree with her, but for me "eroticizing equality" is still an intellectual concept, an ephemeral but "politically correct" objective. How do we make it a visceral, passionate experience?

Working to create and validate a range of sexual choices is somewhat easier for me to see concretely. Learning from other women about their experiences of intimacy, sharing mine, discussing how much and in what ways each of these was a loving and empowering experience – these are all possibilities I can envisage.

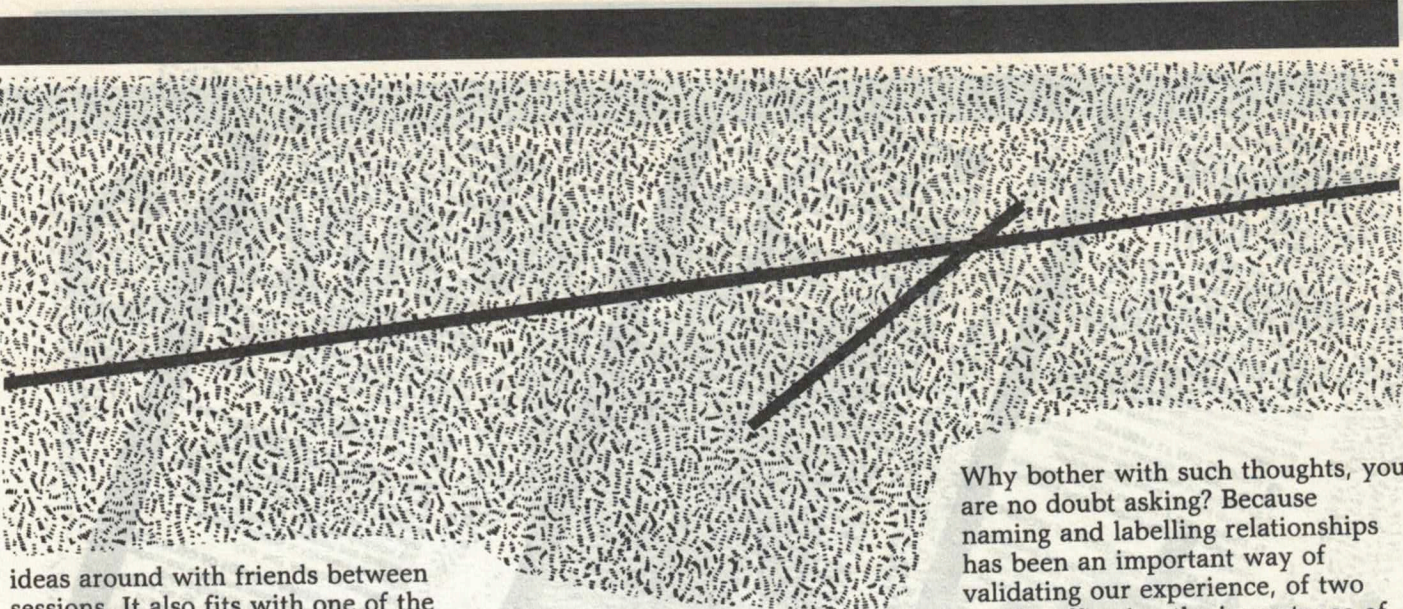
Tied in with this are points that Connie Clement raised, including work that needs to be done to present heterosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality and celibacy as equally valid options. Clement pointed out the transition from a time not so long ago when lesbians were invisible and silenced in the women's movement, to the present

situation, when heterosexuality has become virtually untenable as a political philosophy. Sexual preference seems to be moving into sexual partnership and eventually coercion.

As part of this, she reinforced how the evolution of a clear and positive lesbian sexual identity has been a powerful and creative force, and suggested that it might be equally beneficial for heterosexual and bisexual women to undertake similar work, and to create their own definition of their sexuality within a feminist context.

Clement also raised the idea of "waffling groups," or support groups for women who are changing or reconsidering their sexual preference. This makes a lot of sense to me – surely inherent in the concept of choice is the option to change your mind periodically.

Finally, another point that Cole presented struck me. She talked about sexuality as involving a community, not just a couple, and she said that we all need a passionate, loving, sustaining community. This fits well with many of the issues I felt during the conference, whether it was in a workshop on raising sexually healthy children, in discussions with my lover, in a keynote presentation by JoAnn Loulan where she talked about the "little girl with the broken heart" in all of us, or in bouncing



ideas around with friends between sessions. It also fits with one of the major lessons I learned from the women's movement: in all the work – and all the play – that we have ahead of us in creating and living visions of feminist sexuality, we can be stronger and more loving if we are together.

Joan Riggs

This conference was especially difficult to report on as the subject matter touches my very core. But I bravely went asking specific questions that are crucial to my sexual/intimate development. Many of the questions were not answered – which was not a shortcoming of the conference, but a reflection of the diversity and complexity of our sexuality and potential places we can go in our investigation of woman-centred sexuality.

Although the conference focused on sexuality, at all times I felt a second agenda existed. This undercurrent was our attempt to reaffirm and stretch our community of women. Our ease and ability to hear one another, and the political statement we made by "Coming Together" as lesbians, heterosexuals, celibates and bisexuals symbolized a major bonding of the community.

I see my sexuality as part of an evolutionary process. The more I become aware of my own power, self and autonomy, the more

conscious I am of the specific needs of my sexual being and the stronger I get in pursuing those needs. Beyond that I get lost trying to understand sexuality. Foucault, a major political thinker of the 20th century, developed the idea that sexuality is socially constructed. If I accept that, then there are a million questions I want to ask about my sexuality, most of which have no answers. A few of them being: How much of my sexual attraction to women is a result of a socialization that teaches us to deem all female bodies as sexual commodities, as objects for sexual pleasure? How much of it is a component of my already being woman-defined and being part of a community of women? And how much of it is centred in my deep love, trust and belief in women and in my erotic connection to women?

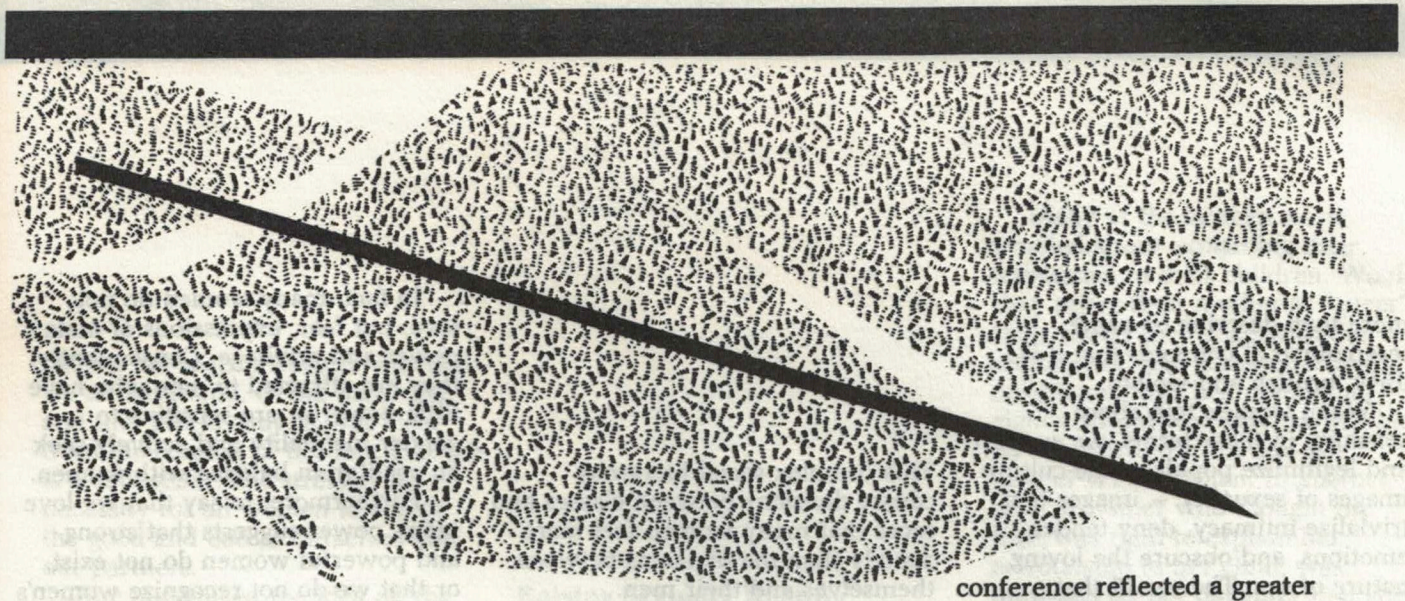
I went seeking some clarity on the difference between friend and lover. Simple definitions based on sexual intimacy ring untrue in my heart and head. Where does intimacy fit into the equation? What do we call relationships that are intensely intimate, have an acknowledged sexual attraction but do not involve sexual activity? Without the appropriate label, how can we convey the deep bonds we have in some relationships that aren't sexual? This becomes especially problematic when we transform sexual relationships into non-sexual ones while still trying to maintain that intimate connection.

Why bother with such thoughts, you are no doubt asking? Because naming and labelling relationships has been an important way of validating our experience, of two people affirming the importance of their commitment.

We are consistently validating and honouring sexual relationships at the expense of non-sexual yet deep and intimate relationships. This creates more pressure for couples to remain together and perpetuate various images of the ideal couple, but also it belittles the many diverse ways we have discovered as women relating to women.

I also came to the conference to explore the complex set of questions around why we choose certain women to be our lovers and not others. Is the combination of love and passion singularly the most important experience of our lives? Does it warp our very sensibilities? It certainly appears so, as we reconstruct lives and household patterns all in the name of love and passion.

At different periods in my life I have realized that the work I want to do in exploring a part of myself must be done with another. Although I rely heavily on my friendship network, the immediate assumption I have always made is that the other must be a lover. I have willingly rejected women who have been ready and willing to do some of that personal work – and instead have chosen women that I am involved with passionately. Why have I chosen a lover who may not necessarily be the best person to explore and potentially alter my very being? Why have I placed so many expectations into my



relationships with a lover?

I would venture to say that most of us have the expectation that our lovers will willingly want to support us and will work with us through our garbage. When they refuse, we are devastated, viewing it as a personal affront and a lessening of the commitment to ourselves and the relationship. Connie Clement provided an alternative when she spoke of her choice to be celibate. In her attempt to break old and dissatisfying patterns of relating with lovers, she chose to do it herself, as she wanted to offer a lover a somewhat complete version, a woman with clarity around her own sexual and intimate needs.

Another option that is consistent with many feminist visions is to start risking and talking with our friends. We have created loving, nurturing circles of friends that can be stretched. We can share ourselves, and believe that our friends will be committed to working through the walls and barriers of our sexuality to get to our real needs and desires.

An interesting question which has been occupying much of my time, was asked by Connie Clement and Susan Cole: where is the love in our sexuality? Have you noticed the only people talking about love these days are god-fearing people or merchandisers who are trying to sell you love in a ring, a house or a microwave? I agree with Susan and Connie — we should start to reclaim the word, the feeling, the

experience. We can turn it into a fine feminist form and I want to start by describing my experience with passionate love (read: sex involved). It has been those profoundly sweet moments when sex has met intimacy ... when I have transcended our world and gone to a place with a lover, touching souls, sharing all that is strong and vulnerable and then returning to be a fuller, wholer person. The experience involves trust in the other person, a wisdom to know that to give is not to relinquish myself, and bravery in going to a place that will not be under my control but will be a creation of two.

It was interesting, or perhaps a reflection of the times, that the open discussion at the closing of the conference centred not on sexuality but on our community, the women's movement. Building upon JoAnn Loulan's and Susan Cole's comments, women stated their place in the movement and the obstacles they have experienced in being accepted as a part of the community (religion, sexual orientation and language were a few barriers mentioned).

JoAnn noted that it is essential that we distinguish between analysis and criticism. To imply that one is the other is to perpetuate woman-hating, and by maintaining this horizontal misogyny, we remain divided and conquered. She felt the

conference reflected a greater sophistication in our movement as we go beyond who we are sleeping with and recognize the commonalities between us. Her sentiments certainly seemed to reflect those of the participants at the conference.

Susan Cole pointed out that to do anything in this community, from organizing an event to speaking out on an issue, is to take risks. It is to make yourself vulnerable as you identify your own place along the evolutionary continuum. And that risk-taking should be recognized and respected.

I ask that other women consider risking. Let us all begin to ask our questions and explore the answers with friends and lovers.

Heterosexual and Feminist: A Contradiction?

by Joan Holmes

I want to respond to some of the comments that panelist Mercedes Steedman made about heterosexual women. Much of what Steedman said did not speak to me or my experience, and some of it I found downright offensive. I reacted most strongly to two of her assertions: "we (heterosexual women) fuck the enemy" and "we (heterosexual women) love men's power." I'll deal with them separately.

First, I really dislike the use of the word "fuck" to name consensual sexual activity. That word does

more than describe or name intercourse; it connotes that it is dirty, brutish and violent.

When women talk about sexuality in those terms, we support and legitimize popular male-culture images of sexuality – images that trivialize intimacy, deny tender emotions, and obscure the loving nature of sex. The use of that language reminds me of the distinction Connie Clement made between bad-touch and good-touch. "Fuck" is bad-touch language.

In her keynote address, Susan Cole challenged us to put the love back into sex. I suggest that we begin by putting love back into our language. When we are talking about loving relationships, we should use loving language; and not reduce every sexual feeling or action to a "fuck."

Connie Clement asked us, "where is the love in sexuality?" To illustrate her concern she related the story of a young woman, who, pressured to be sexually active, "fucked" but never kissed. The girl explained that "kissing was too intimate." When this young woman was growing up, the male-culture model of casual, promiscuous sex was packaged and promoted as "liberating" women. Connie spoke about the sad and bitter consequences for women, if we understand our sexuality in terms defined and delineated by this popular male model.

Many heterosexual women have succeeded in developing good, loving relationships with men. To describe them as "fucking" their mates ("the enemy") grossly misrepresents a significant part of their lives.

It is too simplistic to identify men as "the enemy." The same ideology and material conditions that create and uphold male dominance also promote inequality based on class, ethnicity and race.

This complex social hierarchy causes divisions between classes and races that many women feel more acutely than the divisions between themselves and their men.

The attitude that men are the enemy negates the reality of many women. It denies the possibility that they can work towards a better existence for women if they form significant relationships with men. The most devastating consequence for heterosexual women is that this attitude prohibits us from feeling we have a legitimate forum for discussing our particular needs, frustrations and accomplishments. We fear we cannot expect to get support from other feminist women if we consort with "the enemy."

This attitude suggests that female separatism is the only legitimate choice for feminists, a stance which alienates many women from feminism and the women's movement.

The second point that I would like to address is that "we (heterosexual women) love men's power." It is true that we have all been socialized to admire male power and ways of expressing power. Perhaps this patriarchal unconscious is responsible for us "falling in love" with powerful macho types.

To assert that heterosexual women love men's power, however, suggests that we have not been able to overcome the values instilled in us by this patriarchal world. It denies that, in reality, many women have consciously purged themselves of the admiration of male power, and replaced it with respect for female-centred values, such as sensitivity, nurturing and tenderness.

In fact, many women do not love, but fear, expressions of male power and privilege. Consequently, they are attracted to men who have little power or are sensitive to gender inequality and actively seek an egalitarian balance with women.

Furthermore, to say that we love men's power suggests that strong and powerful women do not exist, or that we do not recognize women's capabilities as being worthy of admiration and emulation.

After listening to Mercedes Steedman talk about heterosexual women, I attended a workshop entitled "Commitment, Caring and Contradictions: Being Feminist and Heterosexual." I was disappointed that this well-attended workshop was dominated by the facilitator reading a prepared paper. Little time was left for the participants to discuss our contradictions and commitments as heterosexual feminists. I wanted to hear from other women who choose to put some of their energy into relationships with men.

Despite my disappointment with one workshop, the conference was well worth attending. It gave me the opportunity to explore important issues with a wide variety of women, whose views and comments are still stimulating my own thoughts on female sexuality.

Sex Oppression, Redefinition and Celebration: Uppity Women Unite
Keynote address by JoAnn Loulan

by Nancy Lewis

JoAnn started off by telling us that she thought her pants were too short and it made her feel insecure. This rather trivial beginning set the tone for JoAnn's keynote, which was both amusing and very personal.

One of her main messages was that we all have silly, trivial hang-ups, and that this is *okay*. It was clear from the content of her talk that she is a counsellor: she stressed the necessity for all women to accept the good and bad in ourselves and our partners.

She introduced the idea of "the little girl with the broken heart" who lives in all of us. This little girl tells us what to do, often causing us to get into situations which are bad for us. However, JoAnn states that the little girl must be recognized and accommodated. JoAnn talked of creating a little pocket in our hearts where we can put our little girls when they wake up and start to dictate to us.

Another theme of JoAnn's talk was that relationships are not always wonderful and passionate; just as we don't go out for amazing expensive lunches every day, but instead go for \$2.50 specials most of the time: so we should accept \$2.50 sex as part of relationships. She confessed that she and her lover only have sex once every month or so, and she now feels that this is normal. She also said that the most passionate and exciting love affair she ever had was with a woman who was totally wrong for her.

It was personal anecdotes such as these that reassured me, and undoubtedly other women, that our own crazy situations are shared by others. She affirmed that we need not feel guilty for having wild flings with people who are obviously wrong for us, or for loving our partners dearly but not feeling sexual towards them, sometimes for long periods of time.

JoAnn is a wonderful public speaker, warm, witty and very personable. For me, her keynote was the high point of the conference.

Raising Sexually Healthy Children

by Joan Holmes

This workshop was run by Vicki Kelman, a social worker in the Toronto Department of Public Health, who has worked with sexually abused adolescent girls and adult incest survivors.

Vicki opened the workshop by showing *The Touch Film*, which explains that touch and physical affection are essential to a child's healthy development and are an ongoing need in adults. The film illustrates how we are taught to restrict physical expressions of affection, especially to boy children and other adults. The fear of sexual abuse and inappropriate physical/sexual intimacy can also prevent us from cuddling and touching little girls. The fact that many of us were crying by the end of this film indicated the deep need we all feel for loving, tender contact with others.

The discussion that followed was lively and thought-provoking. Vicki gave us guidelines she uses for promoting healthy sexuality in children. She advises us to act and speak in accordance with what we find comfortable. Children are quite aware of what is happening in their homes and are sensitive to our embarrassment and ambivalence. If we lie to our children about our own lifestyle or preferences, they become confused and may learn to mistrust us.

Many of the women were worried about explaining their lesbianism to their children. Would they reject their mother as "queer"? How would they cope with the attitudes of their classmates and neighbours? We heard about an eight-year-old who was the last kid on the block to learn that her mother was a lesbian. In another case, a mother who thought the time was right to explain her relationship to her child, was informed by her daughter that she already knew her lover was a woman. Vicki advised women to explain their lesbianism as a personal choice, acknowledging that their choice is not the accepted norm and that many people are homophobic. This approach helps the child understand her mother and at the same time be prepared for negative reactions from others.

The group dealt with specific fears and discomfort women have experienced with nudity, touching, and intimacy with different ages and sexes of children. We were very conscious of wanting to achieve a balance between instilling our children with a healthy positive feeling about their bodies and sexuality, and guarding them against being used sexually. Vicki Kelman reminded us that while children are aware of adult relationships, they cannot fully understand adult sexuality. Intimacy with a child can be very destructive when it is motivated by the sexual needs and desires of the adult, rather than by love and affection.

As a mother of a young son, I found it very helpful to hear other women talk about their experiences and dilemmas, and describe concrete ways of handling sensitive topics. Also, I was greatly encouraged by the many women who did not have children of their own, yet were concerned with the sexual health and development of children.

L . E . T . T . E . R . S

Breaking the Silence would like to encourage women to write—to make this a forum for your ideas, engage in dialogue on the issues that affect you, or respond to the articles published in BTS. We welcome your input!

Dear *Breaking the Silence*,

Here are a few more suggestions for Joan Riggs' already excellent winter solstice gift list (see *Winter '85 issue* for last year's gift list for women friends).

► Give access to practical skills—tools, how-to books, tuition fees for a course on home or car repairs (my favourite house-warming gift was a book on off-beat maintenance jobs you don't find in the usual how-to books, like repairing a hole in vinyl flooring—especially since I was facing just such a hole in my kitchen floor. It's so good to feel

competent in practical matters).

► Give mobility/transportation. If you have a car or drive, remember that many women, especially single parents have no car, and the errands accumulate, especially to the places that are hard to reach by bus. Give a voucher for an afternoon or Saturday of chauffeuring—it's amazing what can be accomplished by your co-pilot on expeditions like this.

► Give horizon-wideners—equipment that makes camping or travel easier and more convenient.

► Give security tools and

skills—better locks, smoke detectors, tuition fees for Wen-do lessons, an engraving pen for marking possessions, a fire extinguisher or escape ladder, caps for electric outlets.

► Give a double gift—make cassettes of the favourite stories of your friend's children so they can play them over and over and free her for other things (my son loved to listen to his collection of stories read by his favourite people).

Patricia Masiuk
Winnipeg, Manitoba



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much less to put it into practice. What the Decade for Women has really shown is that we are taking up an open-ended challenge that will far outlast the Decade.

The foreign funding generated during the Decade, and the pressure exerted by supportive women in the industrialized countries on their own governments has had some concrete effects for Latin American women. Research to document our own history and position as well as specific projects for/by women have burgeoned in the past decade. Women's centres, research/action projects, legal aid offices, health centres and the like have appeared in all Latin American nations.

Another central concern of the Latin American women's movement is the creation of a specifically Latin American perspective, by identifying the commonalities among women in the region and preventing fragmentation and isolation. Communication is

an essential aspect of this effort. Magazines, bulletins, radio and TV shows, regional information networks and even news services have been launched. As well, hundreds of meetings and seminars at the local, regional and national level have been held. None of these tasks are simple, and all require enormous involvement and commitment in order to take advantage of chronically scarce resources.

The influence of feminism

The influence of feminism is significant. Despite the prejudices, a feminist perspective is making great gains in Latin America. For example:

- The issue of women's role in private life is beginning to be debated along with discrimination against women at the public level. Recent street demonstrations by Chilean women demanded "Democracy in our country and in our homes."
- Rebellion is surging in "develop-

ment projects", in community organizations, in unions and in the women's branches of political parties where women's issues have not been dealt with. The belief that issues of gender are a "luxury" which only concern those who do not have to deal with hunger and poverty is being challenged.

After the electoral defeat of most women candidates in Argentina, women's groups formed La Multisectoral, a coalition to lobby around women's issues. This organization has already won significant legislative reforms in the area of family law, and is now threatening to cast blank ballots if women are not better positioned in upcoming elections.

In Uruguay, the attempts to exclude women's groups from Le Concertación Democrática (a coalition of relatively progressive groups), kindled solidarity among women of various backgrounds and led to the creation of the Plenario de Mujeres. Here, party differences have been set

aside to place combined pressure on behalf of a comprehensive program of legislative change in all areas. GREMCU, a study and research centre with a clearly feminist orientation, is a leading consultant in this task.

□ As never before, candidates seek the support of the female public, if only for reasons of demagoguery. Alan Garcia, President-elect of Peru, once stated that he didn't want his daughters to grow up in a patriarchal society. In Costa Rica, one presidential candidate has a woman running for vice president. Alfonsín in Argentina, and the late Tancredo Neves in Brazil, courted the female vote to achieve their respective electoral victories.

□ Perhaps the greatest achievements are yet to bear fruit, although the seeds have been planted. For example, wages for housework are still a long way off, but at least it is acknowledged as work. Today's statesmen feel more progressive when they surround themselves with women. Women no longer accept male prerogative so passively, and some men are even beginning to feel an uneasy conscience about it. Nowadays, they are even beginning to consider accepting well-constructed arguments revealing flagrant cases of discrimination!

Looking to the future

Despite the enormous efforts made to research and organize, most women have never even heard of the Decade bearing their name. Ending the discrimination experienced by women is more than a ten-year matter.

The women's movement of Latin America faces a series of challenges. Among them:

To achieve autonomy as a social movement, and effectively negotiate specific women's issues without weakening other social struggles or appearing as a substitute for political parties. The women's movement must demand serious consideration as a social force within political parties, and obtain recognition of their enriching and deeply democratizing nature. Political parties must also be pushed to tackle the problems of gender discrimination.

To outgrow a certain vocation for marginality. It is important for an alternative movement to obtain access to mainstream mass media, and to influence even the soap operas, radio dramas and "foto-novelas" so popular in the region, without giving up alternative media.

To overcome the trauma of power. Abhorrence of authoritarianism and our

critical position towards some institutions makes the exercise of power difficult for feminists. Power must be viewed as power to accomplish.

To emphasize the movement's profound humanity, and not be limited to denouncing in anger and making demands. For example, feminism is viewed as "pro-abortion," "anti-motherhood," "anti-family," and even "anti-love." These myths must be dispelled, to overcome prejudices which imperil the legitimacy of the movement.

To find ways to reach the large numbers of middle-class women, especially in relation to electoral politics. In countries like Brazil, Argentina and Chile, for example, middle-class women have been a determining force in the breakdown of democracy, due to their susceptibility to anti-communist rhetoric. It is imperative to work with these women so as to increase their personal awareness and political maturity. We must continue to guard against all forms of exploitation and subordination in society, but the women's movement must, by definition, incorporate all women into its cause. bts

This article was adapted from one that first appeared in the Latin American feminist publication, Fempress/Mujer-ilet.

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will complete the abortion and treat her. In the rural areas, a woman might insert parsley stalks or peacock feathers into her womb, or drink tea of "ruda", a weed that has abortifacient properties. At one point in the 70s, abortions were performed in a station wagon parked near the Hospital de Clinicas. If a problem arose, the woman was quickly admitted and the abortionist would disappear without a trace.

While doing my report for *Busqueda*, I interviewed a 28-year-old woman named Mirta. When Mirta, a student, found herself pregnant, she and her boyfriend, both with very little money, searched for a doctor to perform an abortion. They ended up

with a medical student in a house just outside Montevideo. When the student discovered that Mirta was asthmatic, he refused to use anaesthesia because of the risks involved. He performed a D & C without it. Her sister grabbed her ankles, her boyfriend, her shoulders. The abortionist warned her not to cry out because of the neighbours. Mirta bit a handkerchief so she wouldn't howl; "it was the most atrocious pain you could imagine." She gazed far away. I'll never forget her eyes, filled with grief, as she told her story.

The stories are similar everywhere. We women have a collective history of clandestine abortion, with its sequel of pain, misery, risk, illness, infertility and death.

In Uruguay, some have raised their voices against this situation. But more than a quarter million women still lack access to contraceptive methods, which are also expensive. There is no sex education in the schools. It is not surprising that poor women in the slums bear on average 5 to 7 children. It is not surprising that the unscrupulous and well-meaning alike take into their hands what the state neglects - women's lives.

It is difficult to speak of human rights and mercy when women are forced to undergo these experiences. Quite simply, I do not want to hear these stories again. I do not want this to happen again to any woman. Never again. bts

R E S O U R C E S

Female Sexual Slavery and Economic Exploitation: Making Local and Global Connections

The result of an invitational consultation held in San Francisco bringing together women organizers to examine the implications locally and internationally of the economic exploitation of women. Price \$4 US. Order from:

*Non-Governmental Liason Service
United Nations
DC2 - 1103
New York, NY
10017, USA*

Making the Connection - Disarmament, Development and Economic Conversion

The UN Non-Governmental Liason Service has put together an educational kit (in 2 volumes) which addresses these issues. The first volume, *A Reader*, (254 pages) presents 18 essays by scholars, government officials and activists; the second volume *A Resource Guide* (227 pages) provides the pertinent information for getting involved. Price: \$10 US. Order from:

*UN Non-Governmental
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Women ... A World Survey

Written by Ruth Leger Sivard. A document filled with factual information of the global status of women since 1950. MATCH International Centre is the Canadian distributor of this document. Cost \$7 plus \$1.75 for postage and handling.

*MATCH International
401 - 171 Nepean Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K2P 0B4
(613) 238-1312*

Breaking Out

30 minute film, 1985
Director, Brenda Longfellow
Producer, Aline Akesson, OTC Media Productions

This recently released film focuses on the story of one woman, who in many ways represents a multitude of women in her struggle to leave an abusive husband and start a new life for herself and her children. The film is bleakly realistic, highlighting the internal turmoil and external barriers women face when we break with conventional married life because it threatens us and our children with destruction. At the same time, the film suggests the rebirth that is possible when women join together and support each other in gaining independence. Done in semi-documentary style, the film would be a good starting point for discussion of the violence women face in our lives, and the economic and social barriers between us and equality. For information about rental and purchase, contact:

*Aline Akesson,
OTC Media Productions
99 - 3 Charlotte St.
Ottawa, Ont.
(613) 238-8210*

Women's International Network (WIN) News

This is a quarterly which goes to over 100 countries, reporting news from and about women from all parts of the globe. It features columns on women and health, development, the united nations, the media, and more. For further information:

*WIN News
197 Grant Street
Lexington, MA.
02173, USA*

Women's Peace Write/Rite des femmes pour la paix

The Women's Peace Write Campaign, organized by the West Coast Women and Words Society, is mailing 35 selections of prose, poetry, dialogue and lyrics to all members of Parliament each week the House is in session, from June 1985 to May 1986. The writers are women from all across Canada, and their contributions are in English and French. The campaign is to express opposition to the federal government's recent contracts; and the United States' invitation to join "Star Wars." They are asking MPs for their responses, particularly to writers from their riding or area.

A spiral-bound calendar of all of the selections, in order, is available for \$5 to cover printing and mailing costs. For calendars, or for more information, write to:

*West Coast Women and Words
540 W. Broadway, No. 210
Vancouver, B.C.
V5Z 1G4*

The Status of Women Study Tour: India and Nepal Focusing on health and economic projects, escorted by Fran Hoskin, editor of WIN news, will be conducted March 3 to 22. For more information, contact:

*Odyssey Tours
Suite 524, 1821 Wilshire Blvd.
Santa Monica, CA
90403, USA*

Switchboard

This is a newsletter published at Regina by the Saskatchewan Battered Women's Advocacy Network, which provides news, information, suggestions and more, on the issue of wife battering and violence to women.

address:
*2149 Albert St.
Regina, Sask.
S4P 2V1*
or phone:
*352-9121
or toll-free at
1-800-667-9876*

C O N F E R E N C E S

The Saskatchewan's Women's Agricultural Network's Conference on **Farm Women and Stress**, will be held sometime in Feb. 1986 in Saskatchewan. For more information:

*Barb Schuweiler
(306) 263-2146*

First Alberta Farm Women's Conference will be held in Red Deer, Alberta or Edmonton, Jan. 16 - 20 to discuss their mutual concerns. Contact:

*Alice J. Brown
Kathryn, Alberta
TOM 1E0*

The Canadian Association of University Teachers will hold a **Status of Women Workshop**, Jan. 31 - Feb. 1 in Calgary. Contact:

*Tina Head
CAUT
75 Albert Street, 10th floor
Ottawa, Ontario
K1P 5E7
(613) 237-6885*

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