

## 'FREE FROM ALL UNINVITED TOUCH OF MAN'<sup>1</sup>: WOMEN'S CAMPAIGNS AROUND SEXUALITY, 1880-1914

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### *Biographical note*

Sheila Jeffreys' research on feminism, sexuality and sex reform from 1880 to 1930 has been carried out as a postgraduate student in the Department of Applied Social Studies in the University of Bradford. She is a revolutionary feminist and has been active for several years in the Women's Liberation Movement campaigns against male violence. She is presently a member of Women Against Violence Against Women.

**Synopsis**—The history of sex in the last 100 years has generally been represented as a triumphant march from Victorian prudery into the light of sexual freedom. From a feminist perspective the picture is different. During the last wave of feminism women, often represented as prudes and puritans by historians, waged a massive campaign to transform male sexual behaviour in the interests of women. They campaigned against the abuse of women in prostitution, the sexual abuse of children, and marital rape. This article describes the women's activities in the social purity movement, and the increasingly militant stance taken by some pre-war feminists who refused to relate sexually to men, in the context of the developing feminist analysis of sexuality. The main purpose of the paper is to show that in order to understand the significance of this aspect of the women's movement we must look at the area of sexuality not merely as a sphere of personal fulfilment but as an arena of struggle in which male dominance and women's subordination can be most powerfully reinforced and maintained or fundamentally challenged.

The period 1880-1914 witnessed a massive campaign by women to transform male sexual behaviour and protect women from the effects of the exercise of a form of male sexuality damaging to their interests. There is little or no reference to this campaign in the histories of the women's movement in Britain. Other aspects of the feminist struggle such as the suffrage campaign, the movement to improve women's education and work opportunities and to gain changes in the marriage law have all received attention. When historians have mentioned the work of the same feminist campaigners in the area of sexuality they have represented them as prudes and puritans criticising them for not embracing the goal of sexual freedom or women's sexual pleasure and finding in their writings a source of useful humorous material (Rover, 1970; p. 2). While their activities and demands have been seen as challenging and progressive in other areas, the activities of the very same women in the area of sexuality have been seen as backward and retrogressive.

It is not possible to cover in this article the complete range of activities and ideas of these women campaigners. Examples have been selected to give an idea of the size and scope of the campaign and the motivations of the women involved. The women's work will be divided into three sections. Firstly I will describe the efforts of some women to protect other women and female children from the damaging effects of male sexual behaviour, in the form of the use of prostitutes and the sexual abuse of children, in the social purity movement of the 1880s and

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<sup>1</sup> Ethelmer (1893; p. 20).

the 1890s. These women sought directly to challenge and set limits to male sexual behaviour as well as to support the victims. Secondly I will describe the ideas and activities of some 1890s feminists who tackled the problem of sexual behaviour within marriage as well as outside and sought to explain the origins and workings of what they saw to be the foundation of women's oppression, the sex slavery of women. Lastly I will look at the work of some pre-First World War feminists who went so far as to promote the withdrawal of women from sexual relations with men altogether with the aim of eliminating sex slavery.

There are certain basic assumptions underlying the work of historians on the history of sexuality which must be overturned if the significance of the women's campaigns is to be understood. The most pervasive is the assumption that the last 100 years represents a story of progress from the darkness of Victorian prudery towards the light of sexual freedom (Stone, 1977; p. 658). Implicit in this view is the idea that there is an essence of sexuality which though 'repressed' at times in the past, is gradually fighting its way free of the restrictions placed upon it. On examination this 'essence' turns out to be heterosexual and the primary unquestioned heterosexual practice to be that of sexual intercourse. Despite the wealth of work by sociologists and feminists on the social construction of sexuality the idea remains that a natural essence of sexuality exists (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; Jackson, 1978). Another assumption is that there is a unity of interests between men and women in the area of sexuality despite the fact that sexuality represents above all a primary area of interaction between two groups of people, men and women, who have very different access to social, economic and political power. Thus historians who concern themselves with writing the history of the 'regulation of sexuality', without paying serious attention to the way in which the power relationship between the sexes is played out on the field of sexuality, can be seen to be subsuming the interests of women within those of men (Weeks, 1981). A most fundamental assumption is that sexuality is private and personal. It may be understood that social and political pressures influence what happens in the bedroom but sexual behaviour is not recognized as having a dynamic effect in its own right on the structuring of the power relationships in the world which surrounds the bedroom. When sexuality is understood to be the most personal area of private life, it is not surprising that women's campaigns to set limits to the exercise of male sexuality should be regarded with incomprehension or totally misunderstood. Ideas and campaigns which are developing within the current wave of feminism give us a very different basis for looking at the work of our forefathers.

Contemporary feminists have detailed the effects upon women of both the fear and the reality of rape, showing that the exercise of male sexuality in the form of rape, functions as a form of social control on women's lives (Brownmiller, 1978). Rape as social control has the effect of restricting where women may go, what women may do and serves to 'keep us in our place' which is subordinate to men, and thereby helps to maintain male domination over women. Work is now being done by feminists on the damaging effects upon women caused by the exercise of other aspects of male sexuality. The sexual abuse of children, prostitution, pornography and sexual harassment at work are all now being documented and examined (Barry, 1979; Dworkin, 1981; Lederer, 1981; Mackinnon, 1979; Rush, 1980). Feminists are showing that these sexual practices by men are crimes against women though they have consistently been represented as victimless forms of male behaviour. Considering that contemporary feminists are having to wage a difficult struggle to get forms of male behaviour which are essentially crimes against women taken seriously, it is not at all surprising that women's campaigns around precisely the same issues in the last wave of feminism are all but invisible to contemporary historians. Much of the feminist theoretical work on male sexual

behaviour and its effects on women, has been designed to show the ways in which sexual harassment in childhood and in adulthood, at work, on the street and in the home, restricts the lives and opportunities of women and generally undermines our confidence and self respect. There has not yet been sufficient work on the collective effect of all the various forms of male sexual behaviour on women's lives so that an estimate can be made of the total importance of male sexual control in the maintenance of women's subordination. However, enough work has been done to indicate that we must look at the area of sexuality, not merely as a sphere of personal fulfilment, but as a battleground; an arena of struggle and power relationships between the sexes.

Current feminist debate on sexuality has gone further than an examination of the effects of male sexuality on women outside the home to a critique of the institution of heterosexuality and its role in the control and exploitation of women. Questions are now being raised as to the effects upon women of the experience of sexual activity within all heterosexual relationships in terms of the maintenance of male dominance and female submission (Onlywomen Press, 1981; Rich, 1981). Such questioning allows us to see the feminists engaged in struggles around sexuality in previous generations not simply as the victims of a reactionary ideology, but as women manoeuvring, both to gain more power and control within their own lives, and to remove the restrictions placed upon them by the exercise of male sexuality inside and outside the home.

#### SOCIAL PURITY

In the development of the 1880s social purity movement, feminist ideas and personnel played a vitally important part. The most common explanation for the social purity phenomenon given by those historians who have given it any serious attention, is that it was an evangelical, repressive, anti-sex movement (Bristow, 1977). Another approach has been to speak of the anxieties caused by social disruption being displaced onto a concern about sexuality, and to represent the social purity movement as a form of moral panic (Weeks, 1981). Such explanations may help us to understand the involvement of men in social purity. They do not explain the involvement of feminists. Moreover they do not explain the involvement of women who were not self-consciously feminist or even appear anti-feminist in some of their attitudes.<sup>2</sup> Women share a common experience in relation to the exercise of male sexuality and it is likely that the anxieties which drove them into social purity stemmed from the same source.

Behind the movement of the 1880s lay the agitation around the *Contagious Diseases Acts* as well as religious 'revivalism'. The campaign for the repeal of these Acts of the 1860s which allowed compulsory examination of women suspected of working as prostitutes in garrison towns and ports, gave women the experience of thinking and speaking about previously tabooed topics. Women in the *Ladies National Association* inspired by Josephine Butler, were united in indignation against the double standard of sexual morality, men's use of prostitutes and the sexual abuse of children. The feminist opposition to the Acts pointed out that the examinations were an infringement of women's civil rights, and feminists inveighed against

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<sup>2</sup> Some women, such as Millicent Fawcett, had a developed feminist consciousness based on a general understanding of the 'subjection of women'. Others, such as J. Ellice Hopkins, who saw herself as part of the 'movement of women', understood that women shared a common interest and must unite to end the sexual exploitation of women and children, did not carry their understanding of women's oppression much beyond the sexual sphere.

the double standard of sexual morality which enforced such abuse of women in order to protect the health of men who, as they pointed out, had infected the prostitutes in the first place. The progenitors of the social purity movement of the 1880s were men and women who had been involved in the repeal campaign. *The Social Purity Alliance* was set up in 1873 by men involved in the campaign to unite those of their sex who wished to transform their conduct and that of other men, so that self-control could be promoted and prostitution rendered unnecessary. From the 1880s onwards and particularly from 1886 when the *Contagious Diseases Acts* were finally repealed, women who had been involved in the abolition campaign and others who espoused the same principles joined the proliferating social purity organizations in large numbers and brought with them a strong and determined feminist viewpoint. Feminists within social purity fought the assumption that prostitution which they saw as the sacrifice of women for men, was necessary because of the particular biological nature of male sexuality, and stated that the male sexual urge was a social and not a biological phenomenon. They were particularly outraged at the way in which the exercise of male sexuality created a division of women into the 'pure' and the 'fallen' and prevented the unity of the 'sisterhood of women'. They insisted that men were responsible for prostitution and that the way to end such abuse of women was to curb the demand by enjoining chastity upon men, rather than to punish those who provided the supply. They employed the same arguments in their fight against other aspects of male sexual behaviour which they regarded as damaging to women such as sexual abuse of children, incest, rape and other forms of sexual harassment.

J. Ellice Hopkins' name, unlike that of Josephine Butler, is not generally mentioned in connection with the history of feminism. Her general attitude to the relationship between the sexes owes more to the principles of chivalry than to those of feminism as she reveals in comments such as 'the man is the head of the woman, and is therefore the servant of the woman' (Hopkins, 1882; p. 56). Yet her very considerable contribution to the development of social purity represents in many respects a more militant stance than that of women whose feminist credentials are less ambiguous. An examination of her work throws light on the motivations of all women involved in the social purity campaign, both those who had a developed feminist consciousness and those who did not. Hopkins described prostitution as the 'degradation of women' and attacked the male use of prostitutes which led to the creation of 'an immense outcast class of helpless women' (Hopkins, 1879; p. 5). In 1879 Hopkins submitted to a committee of convocation 'A plea for the wider action of the Church of England in the prevention of the degradation of women'. The 'plea' is a courageous assault on the hypocrisy of the Church and its indifference to the elimination of prostitution. It is an impassioned demand for action. Her interest lay, not in punishing women who 'fell' but in protecting women from the damage caused to them by the operation of the double standard and men's sexual practice. She attacks the acceptance by the Church of men's use of women in prostitution in ringing tones:

'... the majority of men, many of them good Christian men, hold the necessity of the existence of this outcast class in a civilised country, where marriage is delayed; the necessity of this wholesale sacrifice of women in body and soul' (Hopkins, 1879; p. 8).

She demanded that the Church should go further than simply setting up penitentiaries for prostitutes, which merely dealt with the symptoms of the disease, and cure the disease itself by setting up men's chastity leagues. She carried the battle to protect women from sexual

exploitation beyond the defensive activities of preventive and rescue work with women.<sup>3</sup> She directed her energies to the transformation of male sexual behaviour through groups in which men might support each other in exercising self-control.

From Hopkins' efforts emerged the *White Cross Army* and the *Church of England Purity Society*. The latter was to oversee preventive and rescue work. The purpose of the *White Cross Army*, which was formed after a meeting of working men at Edinburgh at which Hopkins spoke, was to circulate literature and enlist the support of men. In 1891 the organizations combined to form the *White Cross League* which spread to India, Canada, South Africa, the United States, France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland and many more nations. The pledge cards of the *White Cross Army* show how Hopkins' aim of eliminating the degradation of women was to be fulfilled. The obligations were as follows:

- (1) To treat all women with respect, and to endeavour to defend them from wrong.
- (2) To endeavour to put down all indecent language and coarse jests.
- (3) To maintain the law of purity as equally binding on men and women.
- (4) To endeavour to spread these principles among my companions and to try to help my younger brothers.
- (5) To use every possible means to fulfil the command, "Keep thyself pure" (White Cross League, n.d.).

Hopkins' uncompromising stand on the responsibility of men for the degradation of women, was as strong, if not stronger, than that of other feminist campaigners on the issue. In a pamphlet entitled *The Ride of Death* Hopkins describes prostitutes who have 'lost their way' and are close to 'disease, degradation, curses, drink, despair!' She asks:

'For who has driven them into that position? Men; men who ought to have protected them, instead of degrading them; men, who have taken advantage of a woman's weakness to gratify their own selfish pleasure, not seeing that a woman's weakness was given to call out a man's strength. Ay, I know that it is often the woman who tempts; these poor creatures must tempt or starve. But that does not touch the broad issue, that it is men who endow the degradation of women; it is men who, making the demand, create the supply. Stop the money of men and the whole thing would be starved out in three months time' (Hopkins, n.d.; p. 5).

It was common for women involved in the social purity movement to see themselves as being of one accord with what they saw as the women's movement, particularly with respect to work around the area of sexual morality. Hopkins clearly saw herself as part of the women's movement, as she makes clear in this rousing clarion call to other women to join her:

'I appeal to you . . . not to stand by supinely any longer, and see your own womanhood sunk into degradation, into unnatural uses—crimes against nature, that have no analogue in the animal creation; but, whatever it costs you, to join the vast, silent women's movement which is setting in all over England in defence of your own womanhood . . . I appeal to you . . . to save the children' (Hopkins, 1882; p. 7).

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<sup>3</sup> Rescue workers set up refuges for women working in prostitution with the aim of rehabilitating them. Preventive work included setting up homes for girls considered to be in danger of falling into prostitution to help them find other ways of making a living.

Hopkins did not rely simply on the success of men's chastity leagues in eliminating prostitution and the double standard. Her grand plan for the protection of women and the transformation of male sexual behaviour was to cover the country in a safety net which would include three types of specialized organizations in each town with their own tasks to perform. One of these organizations was the *Ladies National Association for the Care and Protection of Friendless Girls*. The purpose of these associations which were set up after inaugural talks by Hopkins in towns all over Britain, was to establish homes for girls who were homeless, who had come to town looking for work or were between jobs and might otherwise drift into prostitution. The girls were to be trained in domestic work, fitted with clothing through clothing clubs, given employment through a free registry office which would not be, as apparently many registry offices were at that time, a front for entrapment into prostitution. By 1879 Ladies Associations were established in Birmingham, Bristol, Nottingham, London, Edinburgh, Torquay, Cheltenham, Southampton, Winchester, Bedford, Dundee and Perth and during the 1880s they were formed in many other towns following a visit with a rousing speech and general advice from Ellice Hopkins. Hopkins advised the Ladies Associations to set up Vigilance Associations in their towns, where they did not already exist, to concern themselves with indecent printed matter and shows, brothel-visiting, and prosecution of sex offenders. Together the Ladies Associations, the vigilance societies and the men's chastity leagues represented Hopkins' threefold plan for the elimination of the sexual exploitation of women.

Hopkins' work was fuelled by her anger at the abuse of women entailed by men's use of prostitutes. Her contribution to social purity through her writings and tireless organizing tours was in most respects consonant with the aims of other feminist campaigners on the issue of prostitution. She did, however, encounter criticism for being at times, less than scrupulous about the civil liberties of women in the actions she took—for example, removing the children of women working as prostitutes to industrial schools. She constantly voiced her support for those working to abolish the C.D. Acts though she chose to put her energies elsewhere. Organizations which emerged as a result of Hopkins' particular vision of the protection of women, did not necessarily fulfil her aims. *The Church of England Purity Society* met with opposition from the staunchly feminist *Moral Reform Union* over its willingness to support legislation restrictive of women.

An issue of major concern to social purity campaigners, particularly the women involved, was the sexual abuse of children. Revelations about the existence of young girls engaged in prostitution which emerged from the campaign to repeal the C.D. Acts led to the raising of the age of consent for sexual intercourse for girls to 16 in the *Criminal Law Amendment Act* of 1885. After that Act was passed vigorous agitation continued on the subject of the sexual abuse of children. The organization primarily concerned in this agitation was the *National Vigilance Association* which was founded directly from the indignation aroused by W. T. Stead's exposure of the 'White Slave Traffic' which involved the buying of young girls for the purposes of prostitution. Women who had been involved in the repeal campaign joined the NVA at its formation to continue their work to eliminate the double standard and fight the sexual exploitation of women and girls. The NVA fought not only the sexual abuse of children, but many other forms of sexual harassment of women. The Association or its branches provided solicitors to conduct prosecutions in innumerable cases of rape and attempted rape, sexual assault or indecent exposure, and took non-judicial action in cases such as the sending of obscene letters to young girls and the sexual harassment of women in the street (National Vigilance Association, 1886–1905). The NVA sought to implement the

terms of the 1885 Act regarding the sexual abuse of children and swiftly became concerned about the inadequacies of that legislation for the protection of girls. Much of the energies of the organization went into a campaign to introduce new legislation to remedy the deficiencies of the earlier act. The campaign sought to raise the age of consent for indecent assault (which stayed at 13 in 1885) to 16, to match that for sexual intercourse. It sought to extend the time limit for prosecution, fixed at 3 months in 1885. It also sought to abolish the 'reasonable cause to believe' clause which made it a sufficient defence for a man, charged with defilement of girls of 13–16 years, to prove that he believed she was 16 or older. These clauses, quite exceptional in law, were introduced in the 1885 Act, as NVA women pointed out, specifically to protect the male offenders lest the 1885 Act should be truly effective against them. The NVA also sought to amend the provision in the Act that all children's evidence had to be corroborated which made successful prosecution unlikely.

After the death penalty for incest was swept away during the Restoration, there existed no punishment for incest in law. NVA members who came across cases of incest were horrified to discover that fathers offending against girls over the age of 16 could not be penalized. They wanted more severe punishment for the abuse of authority and responsibility involved in cases of incest. The feminist campaigners saw incest as an example of the abuse of power. Millicent Fawcett, who ran the Rescue and Preventive sub-committee of the NVA, gave the following explanation for the absence of legislation on incest:

'Now this may very probably be a survival of the old evil doctrine of the subjection of women and the absolute supremacy of the head of the family over all members of it . . . In all nations of progressive civilization the history of their progress has consisted in the gradual emancipation of sons, servants, daughters and wives from their former subjection' (Fawcett, 1892; p. 3).

She considered that the emancipation of sons and servants was accomplished but not that of women. She said that she was in favour of parental authority but such authority entailed obligations;

' . . . and when a father towards a child, a guardian towards a ward, a master toward a servant, is guilty of using the position of authority the law gives him to induce the child or servant to commit immoral actions, the offence ought to be recognized and punished as having a special degree of gravity' (Fawcett, 1892; p. 3).

Like other NVA women, Fawcett wanted to enshrine in law the principle that men who abused a position of real trust and advantage in the exploitation of young girls, should receive harsher sentences. It was proposed that incest legislation should be included in an act covering abuse by guardians, employers, schoolmasters, and managers of amusement arcades. The *Punishment of Incest Act* which was finally achieved in 1908 did not fulfil these broad aims. The raising of the age of consent for indecent assault to 16 was finally achieved in 1922 after a concerted campaign by a wide range of women's organizations.

The fight for legislative reform was not the only method adopted by feminists in their determination to protect children from sexual exploitation and support the victims. There were also campaigns to get women police to work with the women and girls involved in sex offence cases; to ensure that women doctors would examine abused children, and women magistrates would deal with cases; to establish playgrounds in parks to which adult males would be denied access and women-only carriages in trains for the protection of women and girls. Women also campaigned to educate public opinion on the subject, particularly around

the issue of the male bias of judges and juries. Women in the NVA and other organizations, the suffrage journals and Lady Astor in the House of Commons (after she became the first woman M.P.) all monitored the sentencing of offenders against children and pointed out that judges, not only gave lenient sentences, but were prepared to accuse victims as young as 7 years old of being seductive. One judge excused an offender on the grounds that 'this was the sort of thing which might happen to any man' (Conference on *Criminal Assaults on Children*, 1914). Some women formed themselves into 'watch' committees to monitor each case in their area that came before the courts, in order to show that the magistrates were under surveillance and that their sentencing policy would be publicised (*Assaults on Children*, 1914). These examples give only a taste of the vast quantity of activity being carried out by women around the issue of sexual abuse.

Within the social purity movement from the beginning there was a current of opinion which ran strictly counter to that of the feminist campaigners. Some men and women within social purity were prepared to sacrifice women in the cause of eliminating prostitution by promoting legislation which restricted or penalized women and failed to punish men who used prostitutes. The feminists vigorously opposed such ideas and practices wherever they appeared. One strongly feminist organization, the *Moral Reform Union* (1881–1897) wrote to and attended meetings of those societies which they saw as promoting unjust legislation demanding that they take the views of women into account. These societies included the *Central Vigilance Committee* and the *Church of England Purity Society* (Moral Reform Union, 1883; p. 6; 1884; p. 13). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many feminists changed their tactics and concentrated on the suffrage campaign in the hope that the vote would provide a solution to the problem of the sexual abuse of women and girls. They hoped that legislation introduced through the new women's vote and by women M.P.s, would strengthen the law on sex offences and help improve women's wages so that the poverty which drove women into prostitution would not be so acute. Other feminists, despaired of the attitudes of those social purity campaigners who were attacking 'vice' itself rather than the abuse of women and felt unable to work with them. As feminist energies were withdrawn, many social purity organizations fell under the domination of these anti-vice crusaders.

#### FEMINIST IDEAS ON SEXUALITY

##### *Elizabeth Wollstenholme Elmy and Frances Swiney*

Two feminists who were heavily involved in the suffrage campaign as well as other feminist issues, wrote extensively on sexuality and their writings give us an insight into the ideas and motivations which lay behind feminist agitation on the subject. Both were greatly concerned about prostitution and the sexual abuse of children, but they went further than other women involved in the campaigns, by asserting woman's right to control her own body within marriage and developing a theoretical analysis of the sexual oppression of women.

In a feminist career which spanned 60 years, Elizabeth Wollstenholme Elmy worked alongside the women who were taking the most radical stand on sexuality, such as Josephine Butler and Christabel Pankhurst. Her main campaigning activities were in the areas of higher education for women, women's suffrage, reform of the laws on marriage and the custody of children, and the abolition of the *Contagious Diseases Acts*. She generally wrote under the pseudonym 'Ellis Ethelmer'. Of her major works, two are books on sex education for children,

one, *Woman Free*, is a heavily annotated poem mainly concerned with women's biology and the effects of sexual abuse, and another, *Phases of Love*, is concerned with the ideal form of the sex relation between men and women. Many of her articles pursue the same themes. Her activities in the *Ladies National Association* and in marriage reform gave her practical outlets for her views. Most of her writings date from the 1890s.

Frances Swiney began writing in the 1890s and published a great quantity of books, pamphlets and articles up to the First World War. Her ideas were clearly influential in the women's movement and her books were reviewed and advertised in *The Suffragette* (edited by Christabel Pankhurst) and other suffrage journals. A friendship developed between Swiney and Wollstenholme Elmy out of their activities in the suffrage campaign. Both saw the sexual subjection of women as fundamental to the oppression of women by men. They offered similar solutions which involved the elimination of physical sexual activity between men and women as far as possible and the promotion of sexual self control for men. Wollstenholme Elmy's solution was psychic love. Swiney's was her own particular brand of theosophy promoted through the *League of Isis* which she organized.

Wollstenholme Elmy showed no reluctance in addressing the facts of sexual life, and went so far as to write clear and simple descriptions of the human reproductive process for children at a time when many considered ignorance to be virtuous for adult women let alone for children. The book for older children, published in 1892, was titled *The Human Flower*.

It begins with a description of reproduction in flowers and goes on to describe human reproduction in a manner designed, as she said, to prevent any stigma of 'impurity' from attaching to any part of the human body. In pursuit of this aim the human genitals are described as 'flower-like' organs. The book for younger children was titled, appropriately, *Baby Buds*.

The central theme of her writings was the right of women to control their own bodies. This control was to extend to deciding when and how sexual activity should take place and whether or not to have children. In her sex education book for teenagers she writes of the horror of sexual coercion of the wife by the husband, presumably so that the idea of mutuality and woman's right to decide should be implanted at an early age. In *The Human Flower* she laments the ignorance of most women entering marriage of the 'marital intimacies, which, unless of reciprocal impulse, may prove repugnant and intolerable to her' (Ethelmer, 1892; p. 43). Wollstenholme Elmy left her young readers in no doubt as to the importance of woman's control of her own body:

'... the conviction is every day growing that under no plea or promise can it be permissible to submit the individuality, either mental or physical, of the wife, to the will and coercion of the husband; the functions of wifehood and motherhood must remain solely and entirely within the wife's own option. Coercion, like excess, is in itself a contravention and annihilation of the psychic nature of the sexual relation; since no true affection or love would either prompt or permit to inflict a grief or an injustice on a reluctant partner, and to submit her thus to the possibility of undesired maternity is a procedure equally unjustifiable and inhuman to the mother and the "unwelcome child"' (Ethelmer, 1892; p. 43).

She carried her indignation at sexual coercion in marriage further, by campaigning to get the right of women to refuse sexual intercourse in marriage, recognized by law. From 1880 onwards, when a *Criminal Code Bill* was drawn up which embodied in statute law the fact that a man could not be accused of raping his wife, women sought to show that such an enactment

would reduce the wife to 'bodily slavery'. The women's campaign was unsuccessful: 100 years later it is still not an offence for a husband to rape his wife.

Wollstenholme Elmy was in favour of eliminating sexual intercourse save for the purposes of reproduction. In her sex education literature she merely pointed out the necessity for strict mutuality, combined with the hint that some couples chose only to engage in sexual intercourse for procreation and that this obviated the need for birth control. *Phases of Love* (Ethelmer, 1897) is far more explicit. The book is described as 'A history of the human passion and of its advance from the physical to the psychic character and attribute'. Her main idea is that the history of the human race is a story of the transformation of physical into psychic love. She writes of previous and less enlightened historical systems that 'into each of these masculine schemes was interwoven, with a singular unanimity, the bodily subjection (and hence the degradation) of women!' (Ethelmer, 1897; p. 9). She describes how throughout history men had misused women by 'positive physical oppression and excess' which had resulted in a restriction of woman's 'native individuality of mental power and action' (Ethelmer, 1897; p. 25). Her anger at the way that woman was reduced by men's obsession with physical sex love to a merely sexual function, is echoed again and again through the development of feminist thought from the mid-nineteenth century through to the 1920s. Wollstenholme Elmy's solution was to promote the ideal of sexual self control and its counterpart of 'psychic love', which from her description seems not to have been devoid of physical satisfactions as well as emotional ones. Her aim was to free woman from the 'degradation of her bodily temple to solely animal uses' (Ethelmer, 1897; p. 46) so that she might take a full part in all the areas of life previously arrogated to man.

Wollstenholme Elmy is most remembered and quoted by historians not for her outspoken attacks on sexual coercion in marriage, or her brave accounts of human reproduction for children, but for saying that menstruation was pathological and caused by men's sexual abuse of women—an idea that she did not invent but took straight from the work of contemporary male doctors (Maclaren, 1978; p. 198). Similarly, the treatment of Frances Swiney by historians has tended to be cursory or dismissive, interpreting her either as a crank or as a prude (Mitchell, 1977; p. 319).

Swiney was a passionate feminist, who described in great detail the nature of female oppression and the way in which women were kept in an inferior position. At the root of women's wrongs she placed the sexual subjection of women, and it is this she concentrates on in her writings. She was a matriarchalist and believed that the oppression of women began when men destroyed the matriarchate to make women into sexual slaves who would satisfy their sexual desires. Like Wollstenholme Elmy she accused men of having reduced women to a purely sexual function:

'Men have sought in women only a body. They have possessed that body. They have made it the refuse heap of sexual pathology, when they should have revered it as the Temple of God, The Holy Fane of Life, the Fountain of Health to the human race' (Swiney, 1907; p. 43).

The greatest burden of this sexual subjection was that women were forced to submit to sexual intercourse whenever the male desired, and even at those times which Swiney believed should be most sacred, during pregnancy and immediately after childbirth. She considered such use of the woman's body to be abusive and employed quantities of biological, medical and anthropological evidence to prove her point. She was angry at the subjection of women to unwanted childbearing and her indignation was stimulated by the gynaecological discoveries

which were being revealed in the medical literature of the time. It seemed to Swiney that the constant ailments suffered by the nineteenth-century woman, largely stemmed from a practice which was imposed by man upon woman and quite unnecessary save for procreation, that of sexual intercourse. She listed the effects of venereal diseases which were just coming to light and the many vaginal infections and ailments of the reproductive system which women suffered as a result of sexual intercourse. Some of these sound far-fetched. Many are simply the facts with which women's health handbooks concern themselves today. One of her revelations is now supported by current medical opinion, that is, the link between sperm and cervical cancer. The following quotation demonstrates the power of her rhetoric and the vehemence of her indictment of man:

'Church and State, religion, law, prejudice, custom, tradition, greed, lust, hatred, injustice, selfishness, ignorance, and arrogance have all conspired against her under the sexual rule of the human male. Vices, however, like curses, come back to roost. In his own enfeebled frame, in his diseased tissues, in his weak will, his gibbering idiocy, his raving insanity, and hideous criminality, he reaps the fruits of a dishonoured motherhood, an outraged womanhood, an unnatural, abnormal, stimulated childbirth, and a starved poison-fed infancy . . .' (Swiney, 1907; p. 38).

Swiney's solution to the problem of women being seen purely as the objects of men's sexual use, as well as to the contradictions of sexual intercourse in the forms of unwanted pregnancy and disease, was the 'Law of Continence' or 'Natural Law'. She asserted that sexual intercourse should only take place for the purpose of reproduction and never on any account during periods of lactation or gestation. According to her plan, which included very extended periods of lactation, a woman could be expected to bear children at intervals of 4–5 years. To support her argument she refers to the work of contemporary anthropologists who were describing societies in which women had no more than three or four children and would not allow men sexual access to them for periods of from 2 to 12 years.

Swiney codified the 'Natural Law' into a religious system for the theosophical society she administered, the *League of Isis*. The six rules of observance of the society all concern the regulation of sexual activity according to the 'Natural Law'. Through continence, and only continence, the spiritual aims of theosophists could be realized by the transmutation of physical into mental energy. Such a religious system must have been of positive advantage to women who wished to avoid sexual intercourse, since they could point out that the unwanted activity could be damaging to the 'higher self'. It seems likely that the great appeal of theosophy to women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lay in the justification it gave to continence in men and 'psychic love' for women. Annie Besant is the most famous convert to theosophy and perhaps the most dramatic, since she went from being an advocate and practitioner of free love, to become a most energetic proponent of celibacy—to the astonishment and discomfiture of her friends (Besant, 1877; 1901). Christian social purity, celibate theosophy and the 'psychic love' of a freethinker like Wollstenholme Elmy all contained the advantage that they promoted and justified sexual self control in men.

#### *Sexuality and the suffrage 1906–1914*

The struggle in the area of sexuality gained momentum in the period of suffrage activity before the First World War. The whole range of suffrage organizations, the *Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise Association*, the *Women's Freedom League*, the *Men's League for*

*Women's Suffrage*, the *National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies*, the *Church League for Women's Suffrage*, and the *Women's Social and Political Union*, were issuing statements on the double standard and prostitution which were practically identical in tone. In this intense phase of the suffrage struggle the vote was presented as a cure-all for women's grievances. Suffragists of all persuasions proclaimed that when women had the vote they would enforce chastity on men and end the abuse of women in prostitution, the sexual abuse of children and the sale of women in the 'White Slave' Traffic. The suffragists were involved in a crusade to transform male sexuality and the WSPU was at the forefront. Lucy Re-Bartlett, an admirer of the WSPU, wrote that few realised the 'underlying situation' behind the great struggle for women's suffrage, and its 'magnitude and inevitability':

'The public roughly seems to be divided between people who deny to the struggle any sexual significance at all, and those who, seeing this significance, attribute it to sexual morbidity and hysteria, while the truth, in fact, lies in neither of these extremes' (Re-Bartlett, 1912; p. 28).

Re-Bartlett suggests that the struggle actually signified the transition of men and women from 'spiritual childhood' to 'spiritual adulthood'.

The issue of venereal disease provided a new focus for the feminist struggle around sexuality at this stage. Christabel Pankhurst took up the issue of venereal disease as a tactical move. In an article, *The Suffragette*, in 1913 she explained that raising the issue of sexual vice was a final massive effort to inspire women with the anger and energy which would gain success in the suffrage struggle. She wrote, 'We have here the thing which will appeal to and unite all women' (April 22). She was writing at a time when there was considerable public concern about the prevalence of venereal disease and medical research was at last demonstrating the real and alarming physical effects of the diseases as well as producing the first really effective cures. There was much information at her disposal. In *The Great Scourge and How to End It* (1913) she detailed the effects of venereal disease, pointing out how the diseases affected the wives and children of infected men. She claimed that 75–80 per cent of men had gonorrhoea and a considerable proportion of the rest had syphilis. The solution was 'Votes for Women: and chastity for men' (Pankhurst, 1913; p. 3). The pamphlet contains a lengthy description of what she considered to be wrong with male sexuality.

The serious critique of male sexuality which was launched by feminists in this period, continued to be based upon the idea that woman was maintained in 'sex-slavery' by being seen in terms of sex and no other function. Christabel wrote that sexual disease was due to the 'doctrine that woman is sex and beyond that nothing', and that the result of the untrammelled expression of male sexual desires was that the 'relationship between man and woman has centred in the physical' and the relationship had become that of 'master and slave' (Pankhurst, 1913; p. 20). This idea was echoed by Cicely Hamilton in her book *Marriage as a Trade* (1909/1981) and by contributors to the debate on sexuality in *The Freewoman* magazine in 1911 and 1912.

The sexualization of women was supported by the idea, common to sex reformers and anti-feminists of the period, that the male sexual urge was enormously powerful, almost insatiable and difficult if not impossible to control. The feminists argued, as they had been doing since the women's movement began, that the male urge was constructed and not a natural endowment of man. It could therefore, be retrained and transformed. This refutation of the naturalness of men's sexual abuse of women was potentially revolutionary in its implications for the relations between the sexes. Frances Swiney had scorned the 'large

majority of persons, ignorant of physiology (who) still believe in the exploded fallacy of man's necessity for physical sexual expression and the need for its gratification' (Swiney, n.d.; p. 38). She wrote that 'Woman's redemption from sex-slavery can only be achieved through man's redemption from sex-obsession' (Swiney, n.d.; p. 38). Christabel devoted a chapter in *The Great Scourge* to quashing the argument that sexual intercourse was necessary to men's health and quoted 15 doctors who maintained that continence was not harmful to men and did not cause the genital organs to atrophy. Emmeline Pankhurst joined in the debate as fiercely as her daughter. Commenting on a speech by a man who said that there would always be prostitution she wrote:

'If it is true—I do not believe it for one moment—that men have less power of self control than women have, or might have if properly educated, if there is a terrible distinction between the physical and moral standards of both sexes, then I say as a woman, representing thousands of women all over the world, men must find some way of supplying the needs of their sex which does not include the degradation of ours' (*The Suffragette* August 29, 1913).

Many other aspects of men's sexual behaviour came in for criticism by feminists such as a lack of 'sympathy and gentleness' and the practice of separating sexual activity from the context of emotional relationships.

Judging by their own statements, the reaction of anti-feminist writers and the furore about them in the press, some feminists were choosing, before the First World War, not to have any sexual relations with men. No longer content merely with a critique of male sexual behaviour and a campaign to promote chastity for men, these women were proclaiming the virtue of remaining unmarried and celibate. They were taking this decision in protest against the form taken by male sexuality, the way that women were oppressed in relationships with men, and because some of them believed that the position of all women could only be improved in a society where there was a large class of celibate women. It is difficult to judge the size of this revolt or precisely what it meant to all the women involved, but the amount of anxiety it created amongst anti-feminists and even some feminists suggest that it is worth serious examination. The sex imbalance in the population reached a peak in the 1901 census at 1068 women to every 1000 men and remained at this level in the 1911 census. This imbalance provided a material basis for the alarm of anti-feminists at 'surplus women' and suggested to some of the feminist proponents of celibacy that nature was on their side. More importantly the rate of marriage was low in the pre-war period. 1911 represents a peak for the number of women in each age group from 25 upwards who remained single. The proportion of women to men in the population rose in the 1921 census but the rate of marriage also rose after the war in every age group. Though 1911 does not represent the all time high in the proportion of women to men it does seem to have represented an all time low in the popularity of marriage.

Christabel Pankhurst stated categorically that spinsterhood was a political decision, a deliberate choice made in response to the conditions of sex-slavery:

'There can be no mating between the spiritually developed women of this new day and men who in thought and conduct with regard to sex matters are their inferiors' (Pankhurst, 1913; p. 98).

It can reasonably be assumed that she was not alone in her views in the WSPU, since 63 per cent of members in the same year, 1913, were spinsters and many of the rest widows.

Cicely Hamilton's book *Marriage as a Trade* (1909) is a lengthy exposition of why women

wished to be spinsters, the ploys used against them and her belief in the political necessity of spinsters to the women's revolution. The importance of spinsters was that only they could help advance the cause of women as 'any improvement as has already been effected in the status of the wife and mother has originated outside herself, and is, to a great extent, the work of the formerly contented spinster (Hamilton, 1909; p. 252). As the spinster improved her position she steadily destroyed the prestige of marriage, and the conditions of marriage would have to be improved if there was seen to be a viable alternative to marriage open to women. If marriage was voluntary and not enforced, she thought, men would have to pay for the work they then got for nothing and men would have to exercise self control instead of seeing 'one half of the race as sent into the world to excite desire in the other half' (Hamilton, 1909; p. 278).

Lucy Re-Bartlett in the course of her eulogy to the militant suffragettes proclaimed that the phenomenon of celibacy amongst feminists and other women was a positive decision to refuse to enter into relationships with men until the animal nature of men was transformed and a new spiritual form of relationship between the sexes was possible. In *Sex and Sanctity* after speaking of the 'horrors of the White Slave Traffic' and the 'ruin of little children' she describes the 'new social conscience' arising in Britain and in other countries. These women, she declared:

'. . . feel linked by their womanhood to every suffering woman, and every injured child, and as they look around upon the great mass of men who seem to them indifferent, there is growing up in the hearts of some of these women a great sense of distance . . . In the hearts of many women today is rising a cry somewhat like this: . . . I will know no man, and bear no child until this apathy is broken through—these wrongs be righted' (Re-Bartlett, 1912; p. 125).

She wrote that both married and single women were feeling and acting thus, 'It is the "silent strike" and it is going on all over the world' (Re-Bartlett, 1912; p. 44).

The development of a class of spinsters proud to proclaim that they were happy, fulfilled, had made a deliberate choice and were vital to the political struggle of women, met with serious opposition. From the 1890s onwards there had been developing from the work of Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis and their circle, and the publication of *The Adult* magazine, a body of sex reforming ideas. These ideas, particularly those concerning the physical necessity of sexual intercourse to both sexes and the dangers of 'repression', were represented in the women's movement before the First World War and were used to launch a savage propaganda battle against the 'spinster'. *The Freewoman* magazine gave the opposition its platform. The magazine was founded in 1911 by Dora Marsden who had previously been involved in militant suffrage activity. It was dedicated to promoting the ideas of the sex reformers and carried articles on removing restrictions on women's freedom to relate sexually to men, marriage law reform, the promotion of unmarried love and criticisms of monogamy. The spinster-baiting in *The Freewoman* was conducted alongside a protracted propaganda campaign against the WSPU. The assault on spinsters started in the very first issue. In an article entitled 'The Spinster' written 'By one', the class of 'unhusbanded women' is given a destructive and twisted character. The opening lines indicate the general tone.

'I write of the High Priestess of Society. Not of the mother of sons, but of her barren sister, the withered tree, the acidulous vestal under whose pale shadow we chill and whiten, of the Spinster I write. Because of her power and dominion. She, unobtrusive, meek, soft-footed,

silent, shamefaced, bloodless and boneless, thinned to spirit, enters the secret recesses of the mind, sits at the secret springs of action, and moulds and fashions our emasculate society. She is our social nemesis' (*The Freewoman* November 23, 1911).

In subsequent issues of *The Freewoman* further articles appeared purporting to describe how various varieties of spinsters emerged. One on the college-educated woman spoke in disapproving tones of her growing lack of interest in clothes, lack of sex attraction and indifference to men. Central to the first article was the argument common to the works of the sex-reforming fraternity, that sexual activity with men was vital to the health of women and that without it she became either bitter and twisted or gushingly sentimental. A debate then ensued in the letters pages of the magazine in which the spinsters sought to defend their position. They argued that it was in fact marriage which was ruinous to the health of women and that they were, as spinsters, perfectly happy and healthy. They also argued for the political necessity of a class of spinsters. A correspondence developed between Kathryn Oliver, a spinster, and 'New Subscriber' who subsequently identified herself as Stella Browne. Oliver attacked the 'new morality' saying that she was an 'apostle of the policy of self-restraint in sex-matters' (February 15, 1912). She denied that celibacy endangered women's health. Stella Browne assured readers that many women's health, happiness, social usefulness and mental capacity were 'seriously impaired sometimes totally ruined by the unnatural conditions of their lives,' if they were celibate. She proclaimed that 'sex is a Joy' and bewailed the effects of such women as Oliver on the women's movement!

'It will be an unspeakable catastrophe if our richly complex Feminist movement with its possibilities of power and joy, falls under the domination of sexually deficient and disappointed women, impervious to facts and logic and deeply ignorant of life' (March 7, 1912).

There is no doubt that Stella Browne and other sex-reforming feminists after her, such as Dora Russell, were passionately interested in promoting women's rights to sexual pleasure as a vital component of the struggle for women's emancipation. In order to promote the joy of sex they found it necessary to be uncompromising in their attack on all those whom they considered to be standing in the way of this march to sexual freedom including, just before the First World War, the vast majority of feminists and particularly the spinsters amidst their ranks. In the period immediately before the war the women's movement was deeply divided over the issue of sexuality. One camp advocated the joys and necessities of heterosexual intercourse in or out of marriage without any serious attempt to criticize the form of male sexuality and its effects on women, presumably because such criticism would have detracted from the strength of their campaign. The other camp pointed out that many women received no joy from sexual intercourse, suggested that there were large differences of interest between men and women over the issue of sexuality, launched a major critique of the form of male sexuality and advocated non-cooperation with the sexual desires of men.

The vast majority of feminist campaigners in the last wave of feminism challenged the form taken by male sexuality and sought to transform and set limits to male sexual behaviour in order to protect women from the damaging effects of rape and sexual assault, prostitution and the sexual abuse of children, sexual coercion in marriage and unwanted childbearing. Some saw the 'sex-slavery' which reduced women to a purely sexual function and restricted their lives and opportunities as fundamental to the oppression of women. The tactics they employed included the setting up of men's chastity leagues, supporting the victims,

campaigns of propaganda to enlighten public opinion, the development of spiritual systems, a concentration on the struggle for the vote as a cure-all and total withdrawal from sexual relations with men. The sheer volume of activities engaged in by feminists and the strength of the anger and sense of outrage they expressed suggest that these campaigns were a dominant theme of the women's movement and a very strong motivation behind it.

After the First World War and particularly after the passing of the 1922 Act raising the age of consent for indecent assault to 16, this aspect of the women's movement suffered rapid decline. This decline was concurrent with a general decline of militant feminism and with the triumph of 'sex reform' in the 1920s. The 1920s witnessed a concerted campaign through marriage advice literature and clinics, as well as the works of 'progressive' and conservative sex-reformers, to conscript women into participation in sexual intercourse with men, combined with a sustained assault by the sex reformers on 'the spinster', the 'frigid' woman, militant feminists, 'manhaters' and in particular, women campaigners who were launching a critique of male sexuality. The connection between the decline of militant feminism and the development of the sex reform movement is one of the most interesting questions to emerge from an examination of the literature on sexuality of the 1920s and forms the subject of my continuing research.

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