Letters

Dear *Feminist Review*,

I have just read *Feminist Review* number 11, on sexuality, and was a little disturbed by the way in which my position on male violence was described.

Your discussion of feminist campaigns against male violence states: 'biological sex and political destiny are described as co-terminous' — and this could read as though it were being suggested that I am a biological determinist. I'm sure you're aware that that is *not* my position. My argument is that *in patriarchal societies* a person's primary defining characteristic is their gender, socially constructed from their sex — hence the angst experienced when facing a person whom it is difficult to classify into a gender category on an initial encounter. The first thing stated about a newborn child is its gender, not its relation to the means of production or social class.

Further, in patriarchal society it is not only gender difference that is socially constructed but also male dominance of women. The oppression of women is based in the last analysis on patriarchal definitions of strength as something possessed by and structurally cultivated in men, and negated in women. Despite plentiful evidence to the contrary, women in patriarchal society are defined as *not strong*, ie, weak. Not only are these initial definitions of strength and weakness polarized, but further in cultivating male strength patriarchy links it with violence and aggression. Thus strength and aggression are positively valued in boys — to the extent that masculinity in the adolescent and adult male becomes his defining characteristic. This leads to a situation in which dominance of women by men is a necessary component of 'being a man'. This dominance may at times be expressed in the political and economic oppression of women; but at all times these are underpinned by the threat of violence, a threat most likely to emerge when other forms of oppression are challenged or apparently eroded. So woman hatred films are popularized at times when it seems that women's rights are undermining other forms of dominance.

I hope this letter makes my position clear.

In sisterhood,
Jill Radford