Antibody Politic: AIDS and Society

Tamsin Wilton

*New Clarion Press: Cheltenham 1992,
ISBN 1 873797 04 4, £8.95 Pbk,
ISBN 1 873797 05 2, £22.50 Hbk*

Positively Women: Living with AIDS

Edited by Sue O'Sullivan and
Kate Thomson

*Sheba Feminist Press: London 1992,
ISBN 0 907179 47 9, £9.99 Pbk*

Working with Women and AIDS

Edited by Judy Bury, Val
Morrison and Sheena
McLachlan

*Tavistock/Routledge: London 1992,
ISBN 0 414 07659 5, £10.99, Pbk,
ISBN 0 415 07658 7, £35.00 Hbk*

Women and HIV/AIDS: an International Resource Book

Marge Berer with Sunanda Ray

*Pandora: London 1993,
ISBN 0 04 440 876 5, £14.99 Pbk*

It has taken almost ten years for the needs of women, in the area of HIV and AIDS, to be recognized. The four books reviewed here represent the range of issues which affect women: as people living with HIV, as carers, as counsellors, medics, friends and lovers.

Anyone wanting an overview of the complex socio-political arguments about HIV and AIDS could do no better than read Tamsin Wilton's *Antibody Politic*. Subtitled 'AIDS and Society', the book outlines the complicated scientific and medical issues but in a way guaranteed to demystify and help understanding. Tamsin Wilton examines HIV from a number of social perspectives; particularly looking at racism, sexism and homophobia. Much criticism has been levelled at how safer sex messages have been targeted to lesbians,

seen to be at least risk of contracting HIV. Wilton clearly shows how women identifying as lesbian may be at risk in a number of ways. Many work as prostitutes, may be married, inject drugs, occasionally have sex with men or have sex with women who have been exposed to the virus.

As with gay men, the message is clear; it's not who you are, or how you define your sexuality that matters, it's what you choose to do sexually which is the issue.

Men and women, straight and gay, have a repertoire of sexual behaviour, so using terms like gay sex, lesbian sex, straight sex become meaningless when straight men and women have anal intercourse, men enjoy cunnilingus and lesbians fuck. HIV is passed between people irrespective of gender or orientation. It's what you do that matters.

Working with Women and AIDS also examines social issues in a series of short papers and case studies which look particularly at prostitution, contraception and pregnancy, education and counselling. Background issues covering medical facts and figures together with a review of the impact of HIV on women in New York are included. Two papers sit less comfortably here: written by women who are HIV + and in a section called 'Feelings and Needs'. Perhaps the intention when including these was to remind the reader that, above all, HIV is a devastating personal issue and not just a medical condition. The chapter by Kate Thomson reminds us of this by describing the reality of her life as a person living with HIV infection. It is non-sentimental, straightforward and has more resonance than all the rest of the book put together.

Kate Thomson appears again, having co-edited, with Sue O'Sullivan, *Positively Women*, a hopeful and brave book which chronicles the stories of twelve women and their involvement with *Positively Women*,¹ a self-help group for women with HIV. The stories vary widely, as

biographies do, and are thoroughly engaging, even exciting, to read. These women are honest, open, resilient and above all, pragmatic about their situation. The book is also a resource for women wanting to learn more about HIV, particularly for those who have the virus. Housing needs, legal issues, pregnancy, sex and allopathic medical treatments are outlined as are other healing techniques such as naturopathy and Chinese medicine.

Women and HIV/AIDS: an International Resource Book takes a truly global perspective, with contributions from women (and a few men) across the world. It is a state-of-the-art source book which provides practical examples of good health promotion activities, ideas for running workshops on many aspects of sexuality and HIV, as well as clear discussions of medical and social issues. It also provides an excellent and comprehensive overview of women, sexuality and HIV across the globe. The contributions are written in an

open and friendly way, giving useful tips and hints on a wide variety of issues from getting funding to assertive techniques in condom use. This resource book should be on the bookshelf of every person interested in women, in sexuality and relationships and in international and development issues. The book is published in association with AHRTAG, an international health information agency which aims to provide affordable and appropriate resources, so the book will be available, cheaply, across the world. It is, quite simply, brilliant.

Hazel Slavin

Note

- 1 Positively Women can be contacted at: 5 Sebastian Street, London EC1V 0HE. Tel: 071 490 5515 (client services), 071 490 5501 (admin). Branches in Edinburgh and Glasgow can be contacted through Scottish Aids Monitor; 031 557 3885 (Edinburgh) or 041 353 3133 (Glasgow).

Lesbians Talk (Safer) Sex

Sue O'Sullivan and Pratibha Parmar

Scarlet Press: London 1992,
ISBN 1 85727 020 7, £4.50

Not just about latex; *Lesbians Talk (Safer) Sex* is a comprehensive overview of a range of issues concerning lesbians in relation to HIV and AIDS. Sue O'Sullivan and Pratibha Parmar's well-researched book is the latest in the Scarlet Press 'Lesbians Talk' series, and is the first British publication to tackle exclusively the question of lesbians' place in the struggle against AIDS.

There have been attempts in the past to exclude lesbians from involvement in the struggle against the virus. Some gay men have dismissed lesbians' calls for adequate safe-sex advice, citing 'virus envy' as an ulterior motive, and lesbians themselves have pointed out the

danger of diverting energy from other health issues of more direct concern to lesbians, such as breast and cervical cancer. The authors argue that different groups fighting among themselves can only dilute the power of collective action: 'We can only meet the needs of specific groups if we admit *everyone* affected by HIV and AIDS to the arena' (p. 49) and they emphasize the economic dimension of the devastating effect of the virus among the poor in the US, Asia and Africa.

O'Sullivan and Parmar present their book as 'a challenge to complacency and indifference' (p. 10) and controversial issues such as the perceived 'low risk' status of lesbians and the realities of lesbian sexual behaviour are tackled in a refreshingly non-judgemental way. Ultimately, the message is unequivocal; it is our personal responsibility to make informed choices, and to press