

not consider the position of those women who may for very good reasons want nothing more to do with the father of their children; she does not explore the way that paying money makes people feel they have a right to intervene. With all the power of her critique of orthodox theory, she retains a strangely benign – and ultimately individualist – view of sexual relations.

How much of this can be attributed to her underlying theoretical perspective: her sense of gender difference as the problem, which in the name of justice must be substantially reduced? I would not want to attach too much significance to the poverty of her policy conclusions: anyone who has written feminist theory will know the pressure to follow through with practical implications, and the risks of then adding on a relatively underdeveloped policy review. But the failure to engage with the more bitter and brutal aspects of male-female re-

lations does seem to connect with the fundamentally liberal perception of unfairness and inequality as the problem. If so, then it may reinforce the case of those feminists (a number of whom are represented in the Shanley and Pateman collection) who see the very notion of gender-neutrality as already weighted in the interests of the male.

These are issues that will continue to preoccupy feminist theory and debate, and I recommend both books highly for the way they pursue and clarify such concerns. Both texts will find a ready and enthusiastic audience among those engaged more directly with political theory. But their potential readership now reaches beyond the academic confines, and both have a great deal to say to anyone grappling with current feminist debates. Both are also a very good read.

**Anne Phillips**

## Women and Disability

Susan Lonsdale

*Macmillan: London, 1990*  
ISBN 0 3334 2666 5 £8.99 Pbk

One only needs to browse through feminist literature to realize the extent to which disabled women have remained absent, or on the periphery of feminist discussions. Therefore it was with great enthusiasm that I took the opportunity to review *Women and Disability*.

The book is structured in a fairly familiar academic format. Susan Lonsdale starts with a review of existing literature which incorporates a discussion of the prevalence of disability and considers the social context of disability. It then goes on to look at how disabled women have been rendered invisible by both pro-

fessional service providers and society at large. This provides a backdrop to chapters on self-image and sexuality, and dependency.

The use of a small-scale study helps to demonstrate how disabled women have to confront the same issues as other women, but often do not have access to the same basic rights. For example, Lonsdale cites the experiences of one disabled woman who attended a residential school: 'I wanted privacy, especially when I first started having my periods. I was fifteen and the youngest was six. You got washed in front of all of them. And you had your period pads changed in front of them. I learned about periods from what I had seen when I was younger.' (91)

The author touches upon certain themes which have been central to

understanding women's experiences. The discussion appears sometimes to be somewhat superficial; there is a tendency to gloss over or avoid particular issues. For example, disabled lesbians only warrant a fleeting mention and there is no analysis of the particular issues faced by them.

Lonsdale places her analysis in a policy framework by providing a clear and comprehensive examination of the impact of employment and financial policies on the lives of disabled women. This is the most useful and informative part of the book, particularly as the author goes on to discuss how disabled women are not protected by antidiscrimination and civil rights policies. The book concludes by examining policies and practices which should offer disabled women a greater degree of self-determination and independence.

The author interviewed twenty-two disabled women 'of different ages, races and socio-economic backgrounds', but their views and experiences only appear in the context of supporting or demonstrating her points. The research material could have played a crucial role in bringing the voices of disabled women to the forefront but, unfortunately, it appears that the demands of academia prevailed and the women interviewed were silenced.

Lonsdale claims 'all the black women interviewed said that their disability was a greater handicap than their colour' (45) I am somewhat alarmed at the assumption that the dimensions of race and disability can be isolated and pitched against one another. I can't recall Lonsdale reporting whether the white women she interviewed thought disability was a greater handicap than their gender. It is the cumulative influences of being black, disabled and female which shape our lives. To suggest that any of these factors can be ranked in a hierar-

chical order is a dangerous road to go down.

Susan Lonsdale's book has arrived in a field where there is an urgent need for discussion and debate. However, as a disabled woman reading this book, I cannot help but feel uncomfortable and disappointed. The author states that she has an interest and commitment to addressing the experiences of disabled women. This I do not doubt. However, when a nondisabled woman starts writing about disabled women without addressing her position, or stating what personal and professional perspectives she brings to the research, then I do have serious cause for concern.

Interestingly, Lonsdale writes: 'Very little attention has been devoted to the situation of women who are disabled, and what does exist has usually been written by the women themselves' (40). I trust Ms Lonsdale is not attempting to dismiss disabled women's writing and, I hope she is not implying that our work is not worthy of the same recognition as other academic writing. As disabled women writers we are fighting for the right to be recognized and accepted as equals in both mainstream and feminist circles. Lonsdale (and other feminist academics) must take positive steps to develop a working relationship with us. They should focus their time and energy on enabling us to document our experiences instead of writing on our behalf.

Feminism has now recognized that white women cannot write about the experiences of black women without it being problematical. Similarly, nondisabled women must question their ability to develop an analysis of our experiences as disabled women without it being problematical.

One of the major obstacles facing disabled women is the attitudes of nondisabled people. It's a pity that Susan Lonsdale, as a non-

disabled author, did not take the opportunity to explore the experiences of nondisabled people (particularly women) when interacting with disabled people (especially women).

There is an urgent need for a discussion about disabled women's relationships with the women's movement and how the two interact. Towards the end of the book Lonsdale points out: 'In many ways, the objectives of the women's movement and groups of disabled women are the same: ending discrimination, developing a consciousness among women of how they are disadvantaged, and attempting to reshape and restructure society along feminist lines. But . . . some of the symbols of combating oppression which the women's movement adopted, such as abortion on demand and a rejection of excessive femininity, have often been considered unacceptable to women with disabilities because they gloss over issues which are crucial to them.' (161)

Disabled women are an integral part of the women's movement, therefore the women's movement must reflect our needs, wishes and aspirations. It is unfortunate that Lonsdale did not explore the issues further by airing some of the debates more thoroughly.

*Women and Disability* is useful in terms of providing a comprehensive analysis of disability policies and the impact of these on disabled women. But in terms of providing a thorough analysis of the experiences of disabled women the reader is short-changed. In a field where there is very little written material available, one must be wary of treating it as an authoritative text. Our voices as disabled women are only heard through the mouthpiece of a nondisabled woman. This must make the reader question whether the written text really does justice to our experiences as disabled women.

**Nasa Begum**

## **Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation**

Sophie Laws

*Macmillan: London, 1990*  
 ISBN 0 333 48234 4 £9.99 Pbk;  
 ISBN 0 333 48233 6 £35.00 Hbk

Most of the feminist work concerned with menstruation has come from the matriarchalist/essentialist radical-feminist schools of thought (Weideger, 1978; Delaney, Lupton and Toth, 1976; Shuttle and Redgrove, 1978). Sophie Laws's painstaking investigation into the politics of menstruation is a self-conscious exercise in developing a social-constructionist and yet radical-feminist perspective which refutes biological determinist and universalist explanations. She seeks instead to describe and make sense of social meanings and explore the ways in which competing social defi-

nitions interact. Looking at the social treatment of menstruation and how the practices of our own culture spell out messages about male superiority and compulsory heterosexuality to women, Laws argues that in a patriarchal society, menstruation is seen by men as a marker of femaleness and used to convey a particular belief in women's inferior status.

In order to present a social constructionist argument, Laws's first task was to challenge the universal menstrual taboo theory of much anthropological research in this area. The taboo theory proposes that menstrual blood is inherently dirty and that men are naturally repulsed by a physical function they do not share with women. Laws goes to great lengths to reveal the existence of an immense variety of cultural practices relating to menstruation and argues that it is not useful to reduce