WOMEN IN SOCIETY A Feminist List edited by Jo Campling

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The 1970s and 1980s have seen an explosion of publishing by, about and for women. This new list is designed to make a particular contribution to this process by commissioning and publishing books which consolidate and advance feminist research and debate in key areas in a form suitable for students, academics and researchers but also accessible to a broader general readership.

As far as possible books will adopt an international perspective incorporating comparative material from a range of countries where this is illuminating. Above all they will be interdisciplinary, aiming to put women's studies and feminist discussion firmly on the agenda in subject-areas as disparate as law, physical education, art and social policy.

WOMEN IN SOCIETY

A Feminist List edited by Jo Campling

Published

Sheila Allen and Carol Wolkowitz **Homeworking: myths and realities**
 Jenny Beale **Women in Ireland: voices of change**
 Angela Coyle and Jane Skinner (*editors*) **Women and Work: positive action for change**
 Gillian Dalley **Ideologies of Caring: rethinking community and collectivism**
 Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover (*editors*) **Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words: women's history and women's work**
 Emily Driver and Audrey Droisen (*editors*) **Child Sexual Abuse: feminist perspectives**
 Diana Gittins **The Family in Question: changing households and familiar ideologies**
 Frances Heidensohn **Women and Crime**
 Ursula King **Women and Spirituality: voices of protest and promise**
 Muthoni Likimani (*Introductory Essay by Jean O'Barr*) **Passbook Number F.47927: women and Mau Mau in Kenya**
 Jo Little, Linda Peake and Pat Richardson (*editors*) **Women in Cities: gender and the urban environment**
 Sharon MacDonald, Pat Holden and Shirley Ardener (*editors*) **Images of Women in Peace and War: cross-cultural and historical perspectives**
 Shelley Pennington and Belinda Westover **A Hidden Workforce: homeworkers in England, 1850-1985**
 Vicky Randall **Women and Politics: an international perspective** (2nd edn)
 Rosemary Ridd and Helen Callaway (*editors*) **Caught Up in Conflict: women's responses to political strife**
 Patricia Spallone **Beyond Conception: the new politics of reproduction**
 Taking Liberties Collective **Learning the Hard Way: women's oppression in men's education**
 Clare Ungerson (*editor*) **Women and Social Policy: a reader**
 Ann Woodhouse **Fantastic Women: sex, gender and transvestism**

Forthcoming

Eileen Aird and Judy Lown **Education for Autonomy: processes of change in women's education**
 Niamh Baker **Happily Ever After? Women's fiction in post-war Britain**
 Jennifer Breen **Women and Fiction**
 Maria Brenton **Women and Old Age**
 Joan Busfield **Women and Mental Health**
 Ruth Carter and Gill Kirkup **Women in Engineering**
 Lesley Ferris **Acting Women: images of women in theatre**
 Tuula Gordon **Feminist Mothers**
 Frances Gray **Women and Laughter**
 Eileen Green, Diana Woodward and Sandra Hebron **Women's Leisure, What Leisure?**
 Jennifer Hargreaves **Women and Sport**
 Annie Hudson **Troublesome Girls: adolescence, femininity and the state**
 Susan Lonsdale **Women and Disability**
 Mavis Maclean **Surviving Divorce: women's resources after separation**
 Lesley Rimmer **Women's Family Lives: changes and choices**
 Susan Sellers **Language and Sexual Difference: feminist writing in France**
 Deborah Valenze **The Other Victorian Women**
 Janet Wolff **The Art of Women**

Learning the Hard Way

Women's Oppression in Men's Education

Taking Liberties Collective

Lorraine Biddlecombe

Julie Browne

Berni Charlton

Helena Dowden

Carmen Northcott

Jane Onslow

Judith Priestley

Jane Thompson

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MACMILLAN

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Introduction by Jo Campling</i>	xi
1. The truth about our lives	1
2. Prisoners of gender	42
3. The obstacle race	65
4. Deals and dilemmas	110
5. Worming into Women's Studies	126
6. Doing it for ourselves	140
7. Beware the backlash	162

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Preface

Writing books isn't easy – even for those with a room in which to write, some peace and quiet in which to concentrate and the expectation that other people will take what you have to say seriously. On the whole, women like us don't write books. If we do, they don't get published. In this book we've included the writings of 57 women. All but one or two of us started life as working-class children. All but one or two of us are working-class women. A few of us are black and a few of us are lesbian. Most of us left school at 15 or 16 with no educational qualifications. Most of us live on very little money – courtesy of the DHSS – or on the low wages we, and sometimes our husbands, earn.

The kinds of jobs we were doing at the time of writing include nursing, factory work, waitressing and bar-work, teaching, crèche-work, home-work of various kinds, secretarial and shop work. Some of us are married, a few of us live with the women who are our lovers. All but a few of us have had children. Many of us are single parents with nobody very much to help us look after our children. Some of us have lost our children, to adoption agencies, to Social Services or to ex-husbands. Some of us have direct experience of sexual abuse, alcoholism, drug-abuse, domestic violence and prostitution. We are the women that books get written about. The experiences and ideas of lots of women like us have gone into the making of this book – women who have written for us, talked to us about their lives and shared the experiences we have included here.

The responsibilities for putting this book together has rested on a few – the Taking Liberties Collective – but we couldn't have done it without all the other women who have given us their words and their experiences to include among our own. We came together as a collective through our involvement over the years with a women's

education course called *Second Chance for Women*, held at the Women's Education Centre in Southampton. This is a course for working-class women who want to give education a second chance.

In our collective, 7 out of 8 of us have had no previous experience of writing books, and have had to learn as we go along. During the 18 months we've taken to write the book we were all engaged in other work, paid and unpaid, so we could only set aside one day a week (during school hours and excluding school holidays) to work on the book. By the end of the year we had written four chapters. Three of us had got new jobs and two went on to do full-time courses. Some of the current *Second Chance* women stepped in to help finish the last two chapters. The circumstances of those of us in the collective were far from ideal – most of us were hard-up, two were in the process of getting divorced and two were in the middle of court cases.

While the stress and circumstances of our lives are precisely those which make it very difficult for women to write books, it seems as though they are also the reasons why we should persevere. We are fed up with experts writing about us as objects of research – and getting it wrong. We are fed up with experts writing about education, policies, theories and developments – without any reference to us and how we live our lives – and all contributing to the view that education is somehow separate from those lives. Also we want to put the record straight – to tell the truth about what the experience of 'being educated' did to us in the past and continues to do to us as women now. We want those who see themselves as 'educators' to listen, and try to learn, from those of us on the receiving end of education, as well as those women who like us might be tempted back into education to know what's at stake.

All of us working on this book acknowledge that we are feminists, but we have come to share the set of values and commitments that feminism represents via different routes, according to our own circumstances. At a time when life is hard for many of us, we take comfort in the growth of women's writing and publishing which is one of the achievements of the current wave of feminist activity. But all of us writing this book have at times felt alienated from the very books we have turned to for some reference or record of our lives – either because the experiences of working-class women have been ignored or else they have been expressed in the elitist language sometimes used by academic feminists.

The book which has inspired us the most to redress this balance is *Heart of the Race – Black Women’s Lives in Britain*, which came out soon after we’d embarked on *Learning the Hard Way*. We found the personal testimonies of black women’s experiences of racism and oppression extremely powerful. For those of us who are white they were also extremely challenging and made us determined to confront our own part in that oppression. We also felt encouraged by their example to continue with our own contribution to broadening the base of women’s publishing.

We want more books to be published by women which unravel the complexities of our experiences, but they should be books that are also *for* women, women like us, rather than books *about* us, written in ways we don’t understand. We suspect that not everyone who reads our book will agree with our arguments, but we hope they will, at least, understand them.

In writing this book we have written as women committed first and last to women. The arguments we have made have been checked out with each other, in the light of our own experiences, and while our ways of writing vary enormously, we have altered only those words and phrases in each other’s contributions which seem confusing or unclear. To those of you reading this book who have been taught to gut and skim books for their main points and to discard the bits which seem like elaborations, we ask you to read our words carefully – all of them – and especially the poems and personal accounts. To those of you who’d never dream of behaving so thoughtlessly with our lives, we apologise for the previous instruction. It’s just that having now had some experience of being ‘educated’ ourselves, we know the score and we know what gets read and what gets ignored.

Our method of working has been to meet together as a group once a week, and to work out together the kinds of arguments we wanted to make in each chapter, and the bits of personal writing we could do to illustrate those arguments. At this stage we asked other women to write too, and sometimes we taped discussions with women who felt easier about telling us their experiences than writing them down. When we’d sorted out the ideas and the personal writing for each chapter, one or two women took responsibility for putting the draft of the chapter together, and different women agreed to work on different chapters. When each chapter was drafted, we checked it through together in the collective, to make sure we all agreed with

what was being said and that the writing of it was clear and uncompromising.

By the time we got to the last chapter – ‘Beware the Backlash’ – we were in the middle of a backlash ourselves. Funding was being taken away from the *Second Chance* programme and we found ourselves in the midst of allegations, deputations and demonstrations. So serious was the attack on *Second Chance* that we seemed to be expending all our energies in resisting it, and we were getting well behind schedule with our writing. As much as any other chapter, therefore, this one is stamped with the authority of our own experience and we hope it will serve as a warning to those who imagine that women’s liberation – or even decent women’s education – can be secured easily and without much of a struggle. Women in similar circumstances to us will know precisely what we mean. We hope that others in the future won’t – as we have done – have to learn it all the hard way.

Introduction

It is appropriate that *Learning the Hard Way* is included in the Women in Society list. It takes as its first principle the feminist maxim that 'the personal is political' and creates an analysis about women's oppression in men's education that is firmly rooted in the authority of women's own experience. In the contemporary literature of feminism it contributes a much-needed polemic, which is not absent in other, more literary approaches, but which often gets subsumed in academic feminism's concern to be scholarly. The Taking Liberties Collective write from a commitment which is *for* women rather than *about* women. However, they do not hesitate to draw conclusions and make generalisations about women's oppression in ways that represent the best tradition of women building their own knowledge and creating their own theories out of the validity of women's experience. *Learning the Hard Way* has been written by women whose words are usually never recorded.

Fifty-seven women participated in the writing of this book. Some are black, some are lesbian and most are working class. They came together through their involvement over a number of years on an adult education course at Southampton called 'Second Chance for Women'. They reflect considerable credit to a course which has focused consistently on women. They argue with great conviction about the need for women to be in control of their own learning and to define the kind of education necessary for women.

Yet *Learning the Hard Way* is about much more than education. It is about the realities of working-class life. It is about survival: survival on state benefits; survival against the violence and abuse of male power; survival against racism; survival in a political climate which takes children and jobs away from lesbians. If sexism makes life difficult for successful and aspiring women, it makes the quality of life available to poor and powerless women almost intolerable.

xii *Introduction*

The fact that women do survive is a measure of our strength. The fact that women find the energy and conviction to resist is a measure of our courage. *Learning the Hard Way* reminds more privileged sisters that women's liberation will not be achieved as long as working-class and black women are getting poorer and their lives are becoming harder. It is an honest, provocative and inspiring book which everyone concerned about women's education and women's lives should read – and then read again.

JO CAMPLING