

## Women's Studies Newsletter November 2007



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### **November 2007 Director's Column Looking Back, Looking Ahead, Staying Informed**

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I recently attended a two-day conference on “Women’s Studies at 40: Looking Back, Looking Forward” at Southern Connecticut State University on October 19 and 20. It was an exciting conference, featuring many of the women whose names I know from feminist history, including Amy Kesselman, Rosalyn Baxandall, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, and Margaret Randall. The conference also included several panels of young high school and college women.

I have just been reading the recently published paperback version of the *Feminist Memoir Project*, edited by Rachel Blau Duplessis and Ann Snitow, which includes essays by these –and other--wonderful women who were activists in the early days of feminism’s second wave. I recommend it highly for first-person accounts of women who were “on the front lines” of feminism.

The news recently included the announcement that Christina Fernandez de Kirchner was just elected the President of Argentina. She is the wife of the previous President, so there are sure to be interesting comparisons between her and Hillary Clinton. Interestingly I found that there have

been many women heads of state. A friend asked me for that information, and I discovered two useful sites. One site has 22 pages of women heads of state since the year 2000! It includes small pictures of some of them, and defines heads of state to include the leaders of tribal organizations. Here is one site: [www.guide2womenleaders.com](http://www.guide2womenleaders.com)

How do you keep up with the news? There is a lot of information and many ways to access it. Remember that every source has its own point of view, or bias. To find out more women’s news, try signing up for the free women’s news services. You can subscribe to your choice of the weekly news digest or alerts provided by the Feminist Majority Foundation [www.feminist.org/email/newuser-preferences.asp](http://www.feminist.org/email/newuser-preferences.asp) . The [www.womensenews.org](http://www.womensenews.org) is another good source for information about women and issues important to us.

Looking ahead: in spring 2008 the WMS Program will present some interesting speakers in our annual **Dana Shugar Colloquium** in the Galanti Lounge at 4:00. New URI faculty members Kim Hensley Owens in the Writing Program will speak on “Rhetoric of Childbirth” on Feb 5

Karen De Bruin in the French Department will speak about “Superior Women” and Mme. De Stael on Feb 19

**The Schweers lecture on Women and Health** will feature nurse-midwife Debra Erickson-Owens on new forms of birth control and is there an end to menstruation? On Wed, March 12, 2008.

(Next year we plan to host a talk by a Rhode Island cardiologist on women and heart disease.)

**International Women's Day celebration** on Thursday, March 6, 2008. We have several events planned as part of the celebration, including music by two groups, films, exhibits of women's health and beauty. If your group would like to participate, please contact me.



Ann Telnaes

### **My definition of feminism: The F Word** Erin Carey

I am writing to talk to you about feminism: the f-word, that is so loaded with negative meaning people are even afraid to assert they are feminists. On behalf of the women's studies program, I would like for you all to know what feminism truly means. I speak freely and from my own experience.

To be perfectly honest, it took me a while to grasp that feminism is a living, breathing machine while our history is important, thankfully, feminism is very much alive. The truth is, feminism encompasses virtually all issues that pertain to our daily lives these issues also pertain to men.

So let me tell you what feminism means to me. Society can make it difficult for us to be proud of whom we are. Many of us feel like we are not accepted, or, we see that other people have more opportunity for arbitrary reasons; some of us might even feel the pain of oppression, or feel that we are invisible to society.

The truth is, some of us do not have the same opportunity as other people look around you. Feminists are most interested in bringing these oppressed people into view.

Some of us have been hurt by society more blatantly than others, but I can tell you, each of us has been wounded by society, including myself. When it comes down to it, we are all human beings, so we deserve to be treated the same.

So feminism is ultimately about love, as I see it. Clearly, we are not treated equally and some of these discrepancies are based upon race/ethnicity, age, sex and sexual orientation. Most of us think this is wrong and unfair. Do something about it.

Most feminists are interested in expression, acceptance and community. We aim not to exclude, and if you take a

## **Erin Carey, Feminism continued**

women's studies class you will find the professors are caring, strong, and intelligent people who are there to teach you, never to belittle you. In a women's studies class, you will begin to think about what makes each of us special and human. You will look to yourself and your own identity, questioning "truths" that have been imbedded into your very being. You will learn consciousness is a very powerful tool. We need to have awareness of what is happening to us personally and in our world. Through feminist discipline, you will seek to understand societal phenomena and aspects of our being: gender, health, sexual violence, careers and much more.

Feminism is incredibly broad. I am most interested in racial issues and poverty, while another student might be most interested in rape, or even, preserving our environment. One student might express his/her belief in a poem or song, another through forming a group, and yet another, through writing to congress about an issue.

Feminism is about action, providing a niche for each and every one of us through non-judgment, friendship and acceptance. The only unifying principle: we all deserve to be on an equal playing field.

Let's face it, a lot of people in this country, and around the world, are in a great deal of pain because of oppression. Feminism is a refuge, a place of belonging each and every one of you is welcome. Feminism needs to become powerful enough so that we will continue to create change, little by little. I want you to think about where we would be without feminism.

**Visit our web page**  
[www.uri.edu/artsci/wms](http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms)

## **Female Ferocity: A Patriarchal Society's Fear of Physical Power in the Female Body**

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Ask an individual whether they would like to see a woman's boxing match and one will likely receive one of two responses: (1) an insistence that women's boxing is "repulsive" and "unnatural," or (2) a sexually-loaded innuendo that women's boxing is like "Baywatch with gloves," as sports editor Bert Sugar suggests in his dismissal of the sport (Barovick 1). Still for others, the answer may be a mix of the two responses, suggesting that an act which seems brutally repulsive can simultaneously spur sexual arousal. These responses bear analyzing to understand what it is about two women engaging in a thousands-year-old sport that arouses feelings of revulsion and sexual arousal. Why does fighting seem "unnatural" between two women.

Patriarchy's distaste for female physical strength did not start with the beginnings of women's boxing. The ancient Greeks, creators of the word "patriarchy," write of the Amazons, a matriarchal tribe of female warriors, in terms that attempt to instill fear and revulsion in their readers (it is important to bear in mind that the readers are men, as women in ancient Greece are not allowed to read texts of this nature or "complexity").

Hippocrates writes of the Amazons that: "They have no right breasts...for while they are yet babies their mothers make red-hot a bronze instrument constructed for this very purpose and apply it to the right breast [to] cauterize it, so that its growth is arrested, and all its strength and bulk are diverted to the right shoulder and right arm" (Pollard and Malpass 1). This process is said to provide the women with an improved ability to wield a weapon like a bow and arrow. The Amazons are reputed (and feared) for their amazing archery skills.

### Female Ferocity continued

The sacrifice of a breast, a symbol of motherhood and nourishment, for the gain of physical and military strength resulted in feelings of disgust and repulsion in the (male) Greek readers. The fables were taken a step further: Amazons were said to replenish their population by mating with men from other tribes, and then keeping the daughters and killing the male infants. As Kathy Sawyer notes in her Washington Post article: "the notion of such women . . . mating with men from other tribes, keeping the daughters, and killing male infants ... springs from ... an imaginative impulse in the male-dominated Greek society" (22).

To undermine their maternal impulses is to question their inclusion in the female sex. They are simply labeled as less-than female, and also less-than male. They are rendered "freaks." The potential loss of man as "the sole protector," man as "the sole wielder of power," man as "the leader" would have been imminent had the image of the Amazon woman been admired rather than reviled.

The same thinking process is involved in the exclusion of contemporary female pugilists from the sport of boxing. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) recently decided against including women's boxing at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, China ("Women's Boxing Ruled Out for 2008"). This decision was made despite the fact that the IOC claims one of its main goals is to minimize the disparity in the number of male and female athletes. In the recent Olympic events held in Athens, 59% of competitors were men, while only 41% were female ("Women's Boxing Ruled Out for 2008").

In his article, O'Mara interviews McDowell, an American boxer-turned-trainer who attributes the disdain toward women boxers to the want of skill among so many of them. "Historically," he maintains "they've been

badly trained, their skills so limited that many were unable to defend themselves" (20). McDowell mentions that trainers refused to take on female boxers - and he admits he once entertained similar sentiments. "Some guys say a lot of females are too emotional" (20). McDowell admits that he started to train women because they seemed "to really want to learn... They had a stronger work ethic than the men" (20).

The correlation between women and emotional sensitivity may be one key component in the exclusion of women from boxing. Women are viewed as the emotional sex, and are thereby concluded to be weaker than their male counterparts, the holders of the privileged end: logic. Emotions have seemingly no place in a boxing ring, and here is where hierarchal methods of thinking come into play: if women are emotional, and emotions make one weak, then women have seemingly no place in participating in a brutal and demanding sport like boxing.

This may be why Bob Arum, who manages the male boxer Oscar De La Hoya, dropped Lucia Rijker, considered to be among the sport's best fighters, and now represents an NFL cheerleader Mia St. John, known more for her pink hot pants than her ring skills (Barovik 3) Rijker, a world champion of kick-boxing is considered by boxing enthusiasts to be an incredible boxer. She has even gained some screen-time as the "dirty" boxer opposite Hillary Swank's character in The Million Dollar Baby. To ignore fighters like Rijker and minimize boxing to the level of mud-wrestling strippers is an attempt to eliminate and discredit serious female boxers. To make it a sexual parody for the male gaze is to exclude serious female spectators and those women who may not fit the "Playboy" image: namely hard-working and dedicated athletes like Rijker, and those who aspire to be like her.

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Ann Telnaes

### WrongAid: Prescription Refusal

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In 1996, an Ohio pharmacist was fired for refusing to fill the birth control prescription of a 32 year old woman; the pharmacist explained her actions by invoking the Fifth Commandment – “I want to opt out of the willful decision to kill.” In 2004, eleven state health department nurses in Alabama quit their jobs after refusing to honor birth control prescriptions. Former Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson supported the nurses’ action, saying that the Title X Family Planning Program does not require clinics to offer contraception. In 2007, a 21 year old Rhode Island college student was denied a birth control refill. Only when the student threatened to return with a police escort did the pharmacist begrudgingly fill the prescription.

Rhode Island received a grade of D from NARAL Pro-Choice America for the state’s refusal of medical services legislation. Although Rhode Island requires insurance

**WrongAid continued**

providers to offer equitable coverage of birth control as part of their prescription package, employers or individual insurers can opt out of that clause if it conflicts with their religious tenets. This unfortunately broad refusal clause provides a loophole for individual pharmacists and other medical professionals to decline contraceptive services on religious grounds as well. There is no legal mechanism allowing a woman to circumvent her employer's decision about insurance policies in order to obtain the contraceptive of her choice.

As birth control prices skyrocket, paying out of pocket becomes a less feasible option for more and more women, including students. A 2002 article from ABC News points out the fact that women of reproductive age pay two-thirds more than men on their out of pocket healthcare costs; at the time of that article's publication, it was estimated that birth control pills averaged about \$30, not including any applicable doctors' visit fees. A recent TIME magazine article asserted

that many universities have quintupled the cost of birth control in their student health centers, from the \$3 to \$10 range, to the \$30 to \$50 range. Insurance coverage certainly helps defray these costs, but if a woman's prescription is refused at the pharmacy, all the coverage in the world becomes meaningless.

I have long advocated being an educated consumer. While I cannot vouch for RiteAid's corporate policy on dispensing contraceptives – because their website does not make this information public – a few minutes of research on the Internet turned up scads of complaints against the pharmacy chain. Many of the articles were from the ACLU, or individual states' civil liberties unions, but were primarily related to emergency contraception (EC). Nevertheless, I would like to take this opportunity to urge you to boycott RiteAid pharmacies, on the grounds of your own moral objections – women deserve medication without obstacles!

**Sites y'all should know about**

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There is so much out there on the 'net today. Information about your health, alternative menstrual products, fun toys, fun articles and interesting ideas and opinions are out there waiting to be discovered. I am going to list some of my favorite sites to browse and I hope you all would care to take a look during your much-needed and (hopefully) relaxing winter break.

<http://www.heartless-bitches.com/>

A fun site that always caters to the side of me that's a wee bit "bitchy" ;)

<http://www.womensenews.org/>

News about women's issues—an easy way to get caught up on important current events.

<http://www.vaginapagina.com/>

All about women. It's a well-rounded site, and has a livejournal (livejournal.com) community where any question a woman has about her body (or any concerns) are covered. It's also a wonderful place to get support.

<http://www.divacup.com/>

Alternative menstrual product.

<http://www.thekeeper.com/>

Another alternative menstrual product (made from a different material)

<http://www.myvag.net/>

A woman's take on her body—complete with a zine.

<http://www.babeland.com/>

Fun with yourself or with a partner!

<http://www.kegelpro.com/>  
Kegels: learn about ‘em and do ‘em.

<http://www.28-days.com/>  
This site has an ovulation calendar,  
cycle calculator, and fertility  
awareness software applications

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>

Find one near your home and be  
aware of all the services available to  
you.

<http://www.bitchmagazine.org/>  
A “feminist response to pop culture”.

<http://www.birthcontrol.com/>  
Various birth control products and  
information from all around.

