

LONE RADICAL FEMINIST ACTIONS

By Diana Russell, Ph.D.

Feminists today have been confronted by a prolonged period of anti-feminist backlash in the United States. Many radical feminists in the San Francisco Bay Area, where I live, appear to have given up engaging in women-only or women-led direct activism. I say "appear" because when the media fail to cover our political actions — as they so often do — we, like everyone else, believe that nothing has happened.

Although liberal feminist organizations, such as NOW, have continued to function throughout the backlash period, many other feminists, including some radical feminists, have joined mixed-gendered activist movements, most of which are dominated and/or led by men. For example, they have joined the environmental movement, the animal rights movement, the peace movement (Code Pink is a conspicuous exception), the anti-war movement, and the anti-globalization movement.

Hence, mobilizing radical feminist activists to participate in women-only actions or radical-feminist-initiated actions has become increasingly difficult in my experience. Prior to providing examples to illustrate this statement, I will present a typology of non-governmental political activism in democratic societies that I developed in the hope that it would prove useful in discriminating between different kinds of activism, thereby preventing the confusion that frequently results when the term activism is used in different ways. (See Figure 1.)

Direct Action is defined in Wikipedia as "politically motivated activity undertaken by individuals, groups, or governments to achieve political goals outside of normal social/political channels." Given the topic of this article, direct actions by governments are irrelevant. While the term Indirect has occasionally been used to refer to political actions undertaken within normal social/political channels (e.g., see Blevins, 2009, and Toulouse, 2009), I prefer the term Non-Direct Action for such actions.

As well as differentiating between Direct Action and Non-Direct Action, my typology differentiates between legal and illegal political actions, between violent and non-violent political actions, and between large-scale, small-scale, and solitary actions. Within these last three categories, there are significant crossovers.

Those who engage in Direct and Non-Direct Actions typically want to facilitate social change in societies, in institutions, and/or in the consciousness of other human beings.

To illustrate how much more difficult it appears to have become to organize women-only feminist actions from those that are mixed-gendered, I will contrast two instances of direct action in which I have been involved. The first pertains to my experience participating in a civil disobedience protest organized by a politically-left AIDS activist organization in conjunction with World AIDS Day events

around the world, to promote affordable access to AIDS medication in poor countries, especially South Africa and other African nations. The second details my efforts to mobilize women to join a boycott campaign I initiated to protest a serious case of sexual enslavement of young Indian girls in Berkeley, California. As I will demonstrate, attracting participants to the latter action proved almost impossible.

Civil Disobedience Protest Against Pharmaceutical Companies

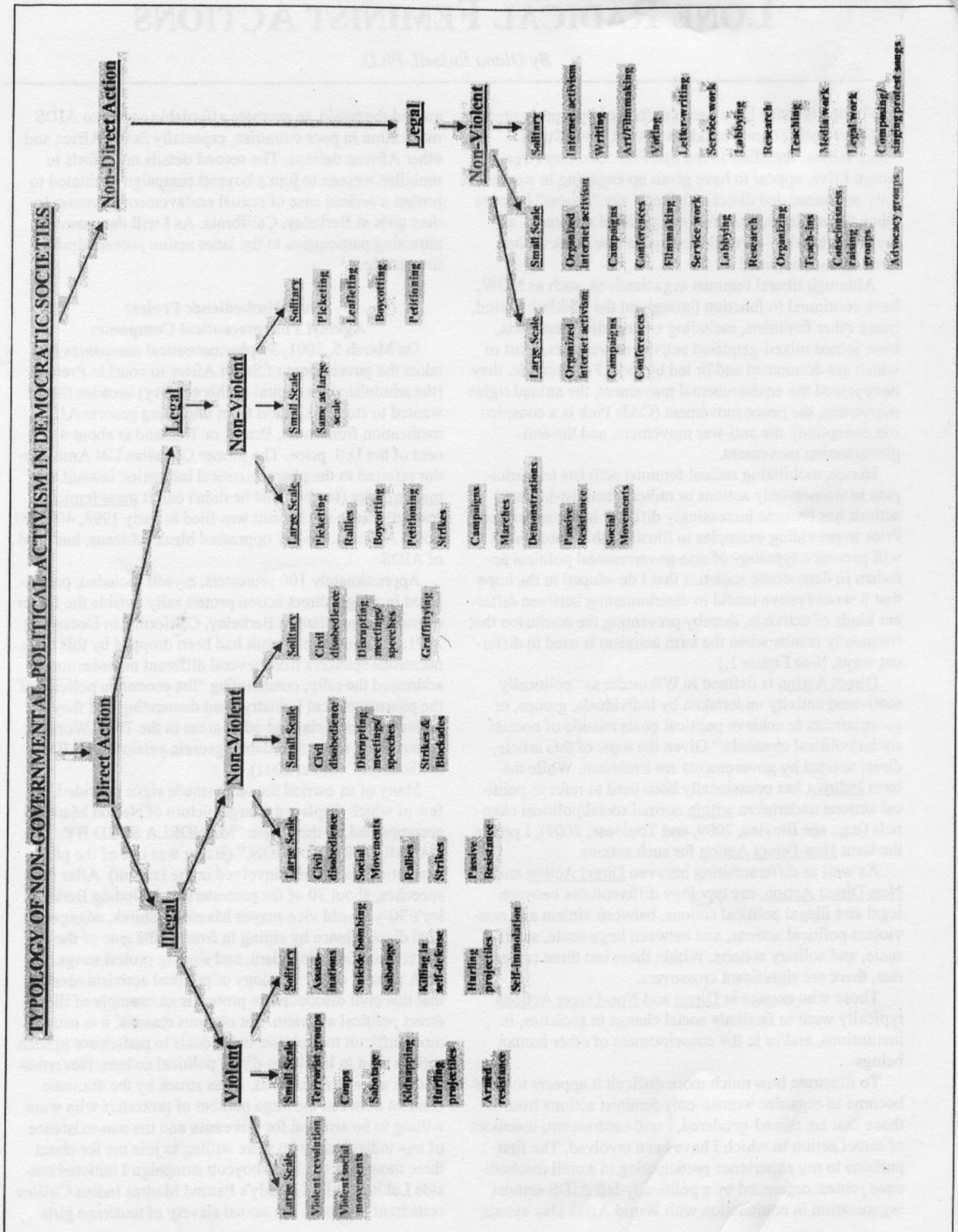
On March 5, 2001, 39 pharmaceutical companies had taken the government of South Africa to court in Pretoria (the administrative capital of this country) because they wanted to stop this nation from importing generic AIDS medication from India, Brazil, or Thailand at about 4 percent of the U.S. price. The former Canadian UN Ambassador referred to the pharmaceutical industries' lawsuit as mass murder (too bad that he didn't call it mass femicide instead). Since the lawsuit was filed in early 1998, 400,000 South Africans, mostly oppressed black Africans, had died of AIDS.

Approximately 100 protesters, myself included, participated in a legal direct action protest rally outside the Bayer manufacturing plant in Berkeley, California, in December 2001. Although the lawsuit had been dropped by this time, numerous speakers from several different organizations addressed the rally, condemning "the economic policies of the pharmaceutical industry" and demanding that they "allow Africa, Asia, and other areas in the Third World to manufacture more affordable, generic versions of AIDS medications" (Sims, 2001).

Many of us carried the ready-made signs provided, a few of which displayed a large picture of Nelson Mandela accompanied by the slogan "MANDELA SUED BY BAYER CORPORATION." (Bayer was one of the pharmaceutical companies involved in the lawsuit). After the speeches, about 30 of the protesters — including Berkeley's 90-year-old vice-mayor Maudelle Shirek, engaged in civil disobedience by sitting in front of the gate of the Bayer manufacturing plant, and singing protest songs.

A perusal of my typology of political activism reveals that this civil disobedience protest is an example of illegal direct political activism. For obvious reasons, it is usually more difficult to mobilize individuals to participate in such actions than in legal non-direct political actions. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, I was struck by the dramatic contrast between the large number of protesters who were willing to be arrested for this cause and the non-existence of any individuals who were willing to join me for about three months in the legal boycott campaign I initiated outside Lakireddy Bali Reddy's Pasand Madras Indian Cuisine restaurant to protest the sexual slavery of underage girls

Figure 1: Typology of Non-Governmental Political Activism in Democratic Societies



that had culminated in the death of one of these young victims.

Sexual Slavery in Berkeley, California

Lakireddy Bali Reddy, 62 (ages apply to 1999), was the wealthy, Indian-born owner of multiple apartments and other businesses in Berkeley, and the richest landlord in this city with the exception of the University of California. On November 24, 1999, two teenage girls, Chanti Prattipati and her sister, suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a gas leak in an apartment owned by Reddy. These girls had lived there with another 20-year-old woman who happened to be with Reddy at the time of the gas leak.

After Reddy was informed about this accident by one of his employees, he and other employees and male members of his family, placed the two unconscious sisters in Reddy's van, one of them hidden in a rolled-up carpet. Berkeley activist Marcia Poole happened to be driving on the street on which Reddy's accomplices were trying to force his 20-year-old sex slave into his van, she witnessed the young woman screaming and resisting their efforts.

When Poole stopped her car to inquire what was going on, Reddy told her to mind her own business. She then flagged down two passing motorists and asked the drivers to call the police. Reddy and his collaborators had failed to call an ambulance or the police because Reddy intended to escape with the two unconscious girls and the 20-year-old in his van.

It was only after the arrival of the police that the two stricken girls were taken to the hospital. Chanti, who it was later learned was pregnant, died there. Her death may well have been caused by the long delay before her conveyance to the hospital, making Reddy culpable for this tragedy. Thanks to lone activist Poole's timely intervention, Chanti's more fortunate younger sister survived. It later became known that Reddy had been trafficking young Indian girls for about fifteen years under the noses of customers, passersby, and the Berkeley police.

In January 2000, Reddy and his son Vijay Lakireddy were belatedly taken into custody and charged with illegally smuggling Indian immigrants into the United States, including the teenage girls smuggled in for Reddy's sexual gratification. Both men were released on bail.

On January 22, 2000, I was incensed by what I read in a *San Francisco Chronicle* article about the death of Chanti, and

Reddy's repeated sexual abuse of his three young sex slaves (although the media failed to use this terminology). I decided to protest outside Reddy's Pasand restaurant in Berkeley that very night, and I called a few feminists whom I thought might be willing to join me in this protest. To my great disappointment, my efforts were unsuccessful.

Four of the issues about which I had long been profoundly concerned — rape of underage girls, sexual slavery, trafficking in girls and women, and femicide (the killing of females by males because they are female), were all possibly involved in Reddy's crimes. Highly motivated to act as I was, I had never before engaged in direct political action on my own, and I had misgivings about doing so. "What can I, a lone radical feminist, do that might have an impact on this horrendous case?" I wondered. Then I remembered that my friend Ruth Michaels had picketed alone on a weekly basis for a year outside a hospital in San Francisco where medical negligence had caused the death of her husband. She also handed out leaflets about what had happened to passersby. Within half an hour of her first solitary protest, six male members of the hospital's administrative staff responded by threatening to call the police to come to arrest her. Ruth contacted the ACLU, whose efforts enabled her to continue her solitary direct action without further harassment.

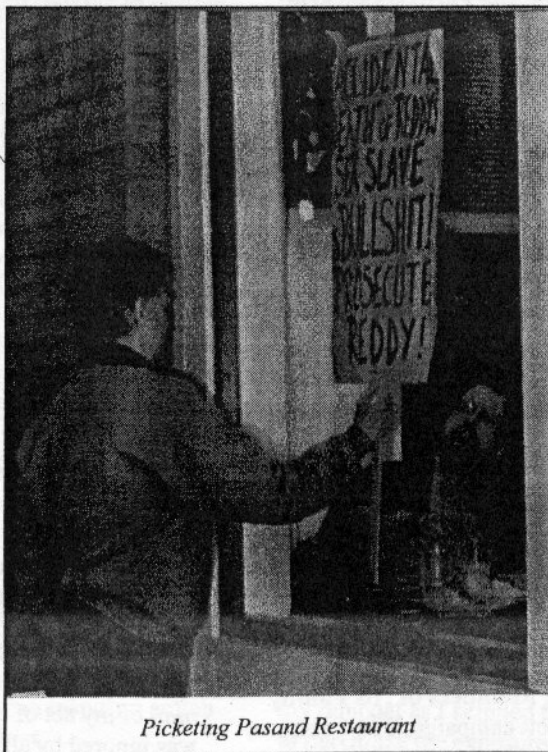
Solitary Boycott Campaign

Encouraged by Ruth's example, I decided to embark on a one-woman boycott campaign outside Reddy's Pasand restaurant in downtown Berkeley that Saturday night. I hoped that others would join me in the very near future.

I hastily drafted a leaflet to explain who Reddy was, and

the crimes in which he had been accused of engaging. As I handed out my leaflets, I urged passersby, as well as would-be customers and patrons entering or exiting the restaurant, to boycott it. After two or three days of boycotting, I started carrying a large picket sign that read, "PROTEST SEXUAL SLAVERY BY PASAND'S OWNER! BOYCOTT PASAND!!"

Unsuccessful in my efforts to find other feminist activists to join my boycott campaign over the next three months, I continued my solitary, almost-nightly pickets for about four weeks, then less often for the next two months. I was delighted to find that I was quite successful in persuading many would-be customers not to dine at Pasand. In addition, several individuals agreed not to dine there in the future, as did many of the cus-



Picketing Pasand Restaurant

tomers who had already eaten there.

I was seldom the recipient of verbal hostility except by Reddy's sons Vijay and Prasad who frequently hurled insults at me, such as "Bitch!" "Nazi!" "Stupid old woman!" Vijay and another relative also videotaped me from time to time -- presumably to provide evidence for an anticipated charge against me, as well as to try to intimidate me. In contrast, numerous passersby thanked me for my protest and for advocating a boycott of Pasand Restaurant. I remain unable to explain why the tremendous support I received did not translate into more individuals being willing to join me.

After about three months, my radical feminist activist friend BJ Miller returned to Berkeley and became my long-term boycott partner. Another woman also became a regular picketer, and a few other women occasionally joined us. Miller and I decided that it would enhance our effectiveness to form ourselves into an organization which we called WOMEN AGAINST SEXUAL SLAVERY (WASS) in June 2000. Although Poole and I were in contact by this time, she had been instructed to remain silent and secluded so as not to contaminate her testimony against Reddy and his sons in the future court proceedings that were anticipated.

Other Protesters

To rectify the impression that I may have given thus far that I alone protested Reddy's trafficking in underage female sex slaves, I hasten to add that two days after the start of my boycott campaign, I learned that an organization called Narika, which assists abused South Asian women, had previously organized a vigil outside Pasand Restaurant to protest Chanti's death on January 29, 2000 -- the very same day that I had started my solitary boycott protest campaign. However, at the last minute, the vigil was postponed to the following week. While I participated in this very successful event, I didn't join Narika because of our political differences, including their opposition to the boycott campaign that I had initiated.

An organization called ASATA became the activist arm of Narika, and engaged, as did I, in protesting outside the federal courthouse in Oakland, California, whenever court proceedings involving Reddy, his sons and other relatives' cases were scheduled, as well as sitting in court to witness the proceedings.

Sued by Reddy and Other Members of His Family

In an effort to end the boycott campaign, Ted Cassman,

Reddy's attorney, sued me on May 26, 2000, for undermining Pasand's earnings! How I hoped that this was true!

(Miller had been careful not to reveal her name, thus evading a similar charge). Cassman specifically objected to my repeatedly displaying my picket signs mere inches away from the front windows of the restaurant so that customers and the indentured-servant-wait people had a clear view of my slogans.

David Greene, the Executive Director of the First Amendment Project in Oakland, California, agreed to be my pro-bono attorney in this case. First, he argued that it wasn't illegal for me to attempt to have a negative impact on the earnings of the Pasand Restaurant. Second, in response to the charge that I had engaged in illegal behavior by displaying my picket signs too close to the front windows of the Pasand Restaurant, Greene

pointed out that Reddy had no right to control the view in front of his restaurant. Cassman failed to respond to Greene's arguments, implicitly conceding defeat.

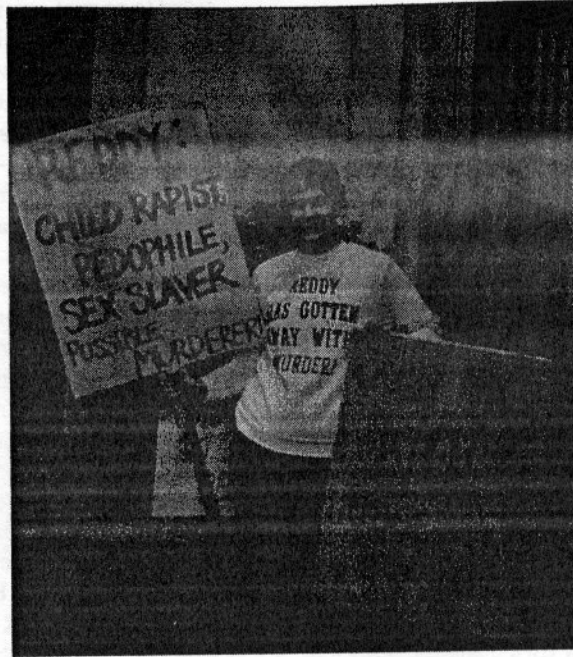
My Lone Act of Civil Disobedience in Court

I engaged in another lone protest in court when the attorneys on both sides of the case recommended that Prasad Lakireddy receive the outrageously light sentence of five years on probation for his crimes. Before arriving at the courthouse, I had painted the words "SEXUAL SLAVERY IS A HEINOUS CRIME" on a strip of white material that I had tucked into my jacket pocket. When the judge announced that she would accept the plea bargain, I leapt to my feet, unfurled my banner, and yelled: "Judge Wilken! Stop giving such outrageously light sentences to sexual slavers! Sexual slavery is a heinous crime!!"

A bailiff snatched my sign from me, then started to pull on my right arm to remove me from court. I anticipated being arrested and spending time in prison in the hope that this would bring more media attention to the scandalously light sentences that were being awarded in this case, and which had already been given to Reddy (a mere 8 years) and Vijay. Before the bailiff was able to drag me from my seat, I was nonplussed to hear the judge loudly instruct him twice to, "Let her go!!" And so he did. I sat down wondering if I should have continued to shout, but my motivation had suddenly drained away.

Erasure by the Media

Except for a one-line description in *The Daily Californian* of my act of civil disobedience in court, my action was ignored by all the other media. Reporters from the *San*



Lone activism outside courthouse

Francisco Chronicle and the *Oakland Tribune* were both present in court. However, neither of them chose to question me afterwards about the motivation for my action, what I had intended to achieve, my reaction to Judge Wilken's response, etc., despite the fact that she could have charged me with contempt of court, which I subsequently learned could have resulted in my being sentenced to several months in jail.

Mobilizing the Berkeley City Council

I drafted a resolution to submit to the Berkeley City Council requesting that this body endorse WASS' boycott of Pasand Restaurant, denounce sexual slavery, and emphasize the importance of giving heavy sentences to sexual slavers. I then approached Kriss Worthington, a progressive member of the Berkeley City Council, to try to facilitate the approval of the resolution by the Berkeley City Council. He radically redrafted my resolution, and thanks to him, the City Council approved it by a vote of 6 to 3 on December 19, 2000.

Reflections on the Boycott Campaign

Although I was shocked by the long time that I was the only one picketing, handing out leaflets, talking to customers, those contemplating becoming customers, and passersby, about the charges against Reddy and his sons, and the purpose of the boycott, I nevertheless believed that I had had a significant impact in persuading a large number of individuals to boycott the Pasand Restaurant, as well as succeeding in raising awareness about this heinous case of misogynist sexual slavery of underage girls by the second richest landlord in Berkeley.

In addition, a woman immigrant from Asia who has to remain anonymous, who picketed the Pasand Restaurant on a few occasions, was so inspired by my lone activism that she engaged very effectively in several lone direct actions when she returned to her home country.

Because the topic of this article is devoted to lone activism, I have not included an account of other actions undertaken by WASS in the Reddy case in which, for example, Poole was a major player.

Other Lone Radical Feminist Actions

Given that many of us radical feminist activists find ourselves isolated in our communities today, I shall focus the remainder of this article on other lone actions in which I have engaged, as well as an account of an inspiring action that could be conducted by a lone activist.

Guerilla Women Against Patriarchy

When I was in Cape Town, South Africa (the land of my birth), in 1993, I designed a T-shirt with the slogan "Guerilla Women Against Patriarchy" (GWAP) embla-

zoned on its front. I informed media representatives that GWAP was an underground radical feminist movement with many members, and that I was its only above-ground representative. I made many copies of a mock diploma certificate titled "The Brotherhood of Male Chauvinist Pigs," which welcomed the membership of the man whose name was to be written on a blank line provided for this purpose. To each diploma certificate I attached a copy of a particularly sexist article, picture, editorial, and/or ad printed in one of the local newspapers. Before mailing it, I wrote the name



of the new "brother" on the diploma and noted that it was being sent by the Guerilla Women Against Patriarchy.

Media representatives typically wanted to know how many women were in this underground movement, and I fabricated that there were an enormous number, but that for reasons of security, we didn't keep a list of our members. While I have no evidence to substantiate the effectiveness of these paper bullets, they served to gratify me during my extended stay in Cape Town where the feminist movement was pitifully weak, and where solidarity between the few feminists there was sorely lacking. Furthermore, I fully anticipated that these humorous Diplomas would raise the awareness about sexism in the recipients in many instances, as well as the colleagues to whom some of them were likely to show it.

Protesting US Leaders' Misogynistic Policies About Nuclear War

There are an infinite number of ways to engage in lone radical feminist direct actions. My personal practice is to give priority to participating in direct actions in which I have an important or vital role to play. Hence, I rarely take part in mass protest marches against this or that reprehensible war unless I can use such marches as a way of raising consciousness about a feminist perspective on the war.

On a few occasions, I donned a Reagan mask when he was the President, dressed in male attire including a raincoat, and strapped a large "MX missile" between my legs. I also attached a hand-painted slogan that read "Nuclear Weapons are a Big Phallacy" to the inside of my raincoat. I flashed my phallic missile while exposing the slogan inside my raincoat as I skipped through the marchers in an effort to maximize the exposure of my feminist criticism of many

male leaders in the United States who act as if nuclear weapons are phallic objects, which they keep striving to enlarge. Anyone who read my slogan understood my point immediately, and typically laughed in appreciation of the humorous way in which I had conveyed my deadly serious message. I presume that they would also remember my "analysis."

Reconceptualizing Woman-Killing:

Examples of Legal Non-Direct Political Activism

Almost all of my feminist books constitute examples of legal non-direct political activism since they were motivated by my desire to raise awareness about several different forms of sexual violence against women and girls. In some cases, my aim was to expose the prevalence of these misogynist crimes, and in others, to advocate ways of combating them.

I began my solitary campaign to get the feminist movement in the U.S. to adopt the concept femicide — the killing of females by males because they are female — by testifying about this misogynist crime at the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels, Belgium, in March 4-8, 1976. I considered it of paramount importance for feminists to use this term to politicize the shocking prevalence of misogynist murders by males of women and girls. This most extreme form of male sexual violence against females has long been neglected by feminist movements in the United States and most other countries, and continues to be overlooked today (outside of Latin America), except in the context of men's violence against their wives and other female partners.

One of the strategies I used to try to motivate the U.S. feminist movement to start using the term femicide and to include it in our campaigns against violence against women and girls was to co-edit two anthologies: *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing*, (with Jill Radford), 1992; and *Femicide in Global Perspective*, (with Roberta Harms), 2001. Although this strategy proved mostly ineffective in the United States, the first of these anthologies has had a very significant impact in Latin America. "Sometimes a book changes history," declared Marcela Lagarde, a former Mexican Congresswoman and a Professor of Anthropology, "and *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* is such a book" (2004). She described how reading this book had revolutionized her understanding of the murder of girls and women.

As I told Lagarde, it was what she did (initially, as a lone activist) after reading *Femicide* that changed history, not the book. She played a major role in the concept of femicide

becoming widely used in Mexico, including at a government level. She also was responsible for helping to spread the term femicide to many feminist organizations in several other Latin American countries. A few of these organizations have succeeded in getting their governments to implement laws against femicide, and feminists in other Latin American countries are endeavoring to do the same. It is evident that when feminists in Latin American countries have embraced the term femicide, this is not just a matter of adding a new word to feminists' vocabulary; it typically results in organizing efforts to eradicate these misogynist crimes.

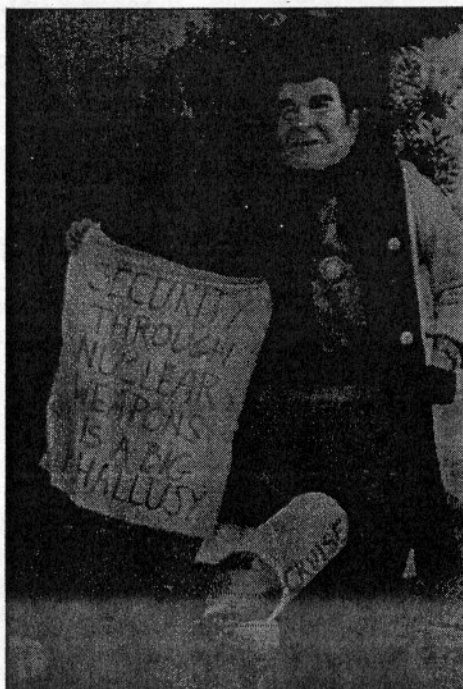
Wearing Radical Feminist T-Shirts

Simply wearing t-shirts bearing radical feminist slogans, especially when being interviewed on TV or by newspaper reporters, can convey a feminist message to millions of viewers and/or newspaper readers (if mentioned by the journalist or photographed) without costing an iota of energy. It has been my policy for many years to have personal one-of-a-kind T-shirts made bearing feminist slogans that are appropriate for the actions on which I have embarked. For example, I designed two T-shirts bearing the slogans, "STOP FEMICIDE!" and "ORGANIZE AGAINST FEMICIDE," one of which I wore in a mass march against the femicides in Juarez, Mexico, organized by Eve Ensler. In addition, I had a T-shirt bearing the slogan "HUSTLER MAGAZINE PROMOTES INCEST AND RAPE" when I was invited to appear on the Jenny Jones Show with Larry Flynt and other guests.

Non-Direct Action: An Inspiring Example

After several brutal rapes had occurred at the University of Cape Town (UCT) some time in the 1990s, and after the administration of the university had done little to try to solve these crimes, an anonymous one-page leaflet was widely distributed on which there was a large drawing of a penis and testicles being cut off by a pair of scissors, with red blood dripping from the incision. The accompanying text stated that the rapists would be castrated by angry women who knew their identities.

Members of the administration, as well as some students, were immensely critical of the creators of the leaflet for remaining anonymous, castigating them for their alleged cowardice in not identifying themselves. Administrators focused their efforts on discovering who was responsible (of course, the leaflet could have been written by a lone activist) rather than on increasing their efforts to apprehend the



Protesting Nuclear Phallacies

rapists. The furor over this incident continued for several weeks, culminating in the administration's decision to fund a campus-wide study of the prevalence of sexual harassment, including rape, on the campus. The shocking discovery of widespread sexual harassment, including serious assaults, resulted in appropriate mechanisms being implemented at UCT to deal with this formerly neglected problem. The creators of the leaflet — whom I presume were women — were never exposed. They must have been enormously gratified by what they had accomplished by simply distributing a leaflet and keeping mum about their responsibility for this extremely successful non-violent direct action.

Similar GUTSY actions can obviously be undertaken by any number of women acting alone. A large group of women participants would be disadvantaged by being at greater risk of being identified. Had the actual woman activist(s) at UCT been discovered, I believe she/they would have been heavily disciplined by the administration (perhaps even expelled from the university), and in considerable danger of bodily injury by one or more angry misogynists, as well as at risk of other less severe forms of retribution. In addition, I suspect that no survey of sexual harassment would have been sponsored by the administration. I hope this example will inspire radical feminists, whether alone or with one or two other radical feminists, to realize how effective they can be if they make strategic decisions about how they can create the maximum impact on the issues about which they are most concerned.

Publication of Radical Feminist Books As Non-Direct Actions

I have spent a large portion of my adult life engaging in the research, writing, and publication of radical feminist books, including: *The Politics of Rape* (1975); *Rape in Marriage* (1982); *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse, and Workplace Harassment* (1984); *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* (1986); *Exposing Nuclear Phallacies* (1989); *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography* (1993); *Against Pornography: The Evidence of Harm* (1994); *Behind Closed Doors in White South Africa: Incest Survivors Tell Their Stories* (1997).

My motivation in undertaking these and other books not listed above has always been political, e.g., to publicize and analyze different forms of male violence and abuse against women and girls that had been neglected by feminists at the time I wrote them. In several cases, I ended my books by proposing revolutionary structural changes that are needed, as well as recommending reforms in which feminist activists and others can engage to combat these brutal and prevalent forms of misogynist behaviors.

Conclusion

Whether one is an isolated radical feminist, or has one, or two, or three, or any number of sisters with whom to join forces, we must remember the following wise words of Frederick Douglass in 1857 who emphasized the necessity for oppressed peoples to engage in political actions:

Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

While some issues may not be amenable to direct action by lone activists, I cannot think of any problem that a lone individual couldn't endeavor to combat by engaging in one or more of the many examples of political activism included in my typology.

*I would like to express my appreciation for helpful suggestions made by Esther Rothblum, Angie Keys, and Gariné Roubinian.

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